Vyacheslav
GORBACHEV

BEYOND THE ARCTIC BLIZZARDS

Raduga Publishers . Moscow

Vyacheslav Gorbachev was born on the sixteenth of June, 1941, a week before the Soviet Union was attacked by Nazi Germany and was thus drawn into the Second World War.

He began his working life as an apprentice, later a qualified printer. After a course of technical retraining in the town of Gorky, he worked for a number of years as a crane operator on the Northern Dvina, Kama, Volga and Amur rivers, and he travelled the length of Siberia's major river, the Yenisei.

At the age of twenty Gorbachev began working as a journalist, fitting this in with his main occupation, that of mechanic and engineer. His first short story was published in a Moscow newspaper in 1964.

He studied at the Maxim Gorky Institute of Literature in Moscow, and has for many years worked as an editor of a number of literary journals and similar publications.

His works include "The Test of Youth", "Haymaking", "Bow to the Earth", "Time Shows the Way", and many more.

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BEYOND THE ARCTIC BLIZZARDS

A Novel

Raduga Publishers . Moscow

Translated from the Russian by *Alex Miller*
Designed by *Viktor Korolkov*

В. ГОРБАЧЕВ

За далью непогоды
Роман

На английском языке

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Reading the works of Vyacheslav Gorbachev, the thought is never far from my mind that the author, whatever his immediate subject, always has one particular message lurking beneath the surface and aching to make itself heard.

What is this message which he uses to set the tone of his works?

I heard the answer to this question quite by accident from a professor at the Institute of Literature in Moscow where Gorbachev studied.

During the Institute seminars, when a young writer's work was being discussed, one probing question was always asked: "Why did you decide to become a writer?" Of course, many are lured into a literary vocation by the thirst for fame, success and material wealth. Yet there are few students who realise that all the riches in the world are worth nothing before the daily round of hard labour to which even the least original of talents willingly consigns itself.

But Vyacheslav Gorbachev, who had already received a technical education and had spent quite some time working as an engineer, had strong reasons for wanting to dedicate his life to literature, reasons based in his moral outlook on life.

This outlook is evident in his attitude towards a small incident which occurred in his childhood. The house where he lived was in a suburb of Oryol, a town which has rightly been called a

nesting place of Russian literature. The town is connected with the names of such leading Russian writers as Turgenev, Lev Tolstoy, Leskov, Fet, Bunin, Leonid Andreyev and many others.

It was inevitable that the future writer grew up in an atmosphere of great admiration for the classics of Russian literature. And this atmosphere could not help but have a beneficial effect on the formation of his outlook and character.

His father was a tester in a factory making self-propelled graders, and his mother was a hospital nurse. In the small garden of the Gorbachevs' house there was an apple tree which had been planted right up against their next-door neighbour's fence. When the tree had grown and was in flower the next-door neighbour complained that it was blocking out the light from his garden.

"What can we do about it now?" asked Gorbachev senior, seeing no way round the problem. "Don't worry, I know what we can do," replied the neighbour; he fetched a hack-saw and cut off that part of the tree which was casting a shadow over his garden.

The Gorbachevs and their neighbour fell out, and because of the worry of the quarrel Gorbachev senior was taken to hospital. The young Vyacheslav, a witness to this petty domestic drama, was to retain in his heart an aching sympathy for all living things.

"This ache," he said in answer to the Institute's question, "still gives me no peace. It is this that made me decide to become a writer."

Vyacheslav Gorbachev left his childhood behind at an early age. He worked as a floating-crane operator on the Volga, Kama and Northern Dvina rivers. He was a metal-worker, a mechanic and an engineer in the river ports of the Far East, Siberia and the Arctic regions. He learnt the editor's trade

while working for a number of publishing houses and literary journals.

His first story appeared in 1969; both readers and critics were delighted by the literary originality of its theme. In this story the young hero suffers, for the first time, one of life's rude awakenings—betrayal by a friend. But this betrayal is also one of life's lessons, from which the hero learns and progresses along life's road. The hero is thus an embodiment of the writer's concept of optimism. The story has the polemic title "The Test of Youth".

In this work Gorbachev wrote about his own youth, about how he finished his technical education in the town of Gorky and went to work far away on the Amur River, about the first steps taken by himself and his friends in their working lives.

"The author's sympathy," one critic wrote after his first work, "is with those of his characters who, though they may err from time to time, are nevertheless honest, persistent and noble, who consider it their highest duty to serve other people..."

In "The Test of Youth", Sergei Gorobets may blunder from time to time, but even in his own diary he does not try to lay the blame for his mistakes onto other people. Gorbachev's hero prefers concrete action to words, and he begins by correcting what has gone wrong. For him "words" and "deeds" have changed places. In this story the man of action is contrasted with the idle talker.

It is to Gorbachev's credit that even in his early works he was able to present sufficiently clearly a viable code of life. Gorobets learns a great deal from life, including the ability to prepare the way for his ideas in the minds of the people around him, before trying to depend on their moral support.

The main character in his first story is given a certain amount of authority in the port where he works, and he almost makes a complete fool of himself in trying to overcome its minor inadequacies, meanwhile losing the most important factor—the support of his mates. The major lesson which Gorbachev's young characters learn in "The Test of Youth" is that "words" must be moulded into one with "deeds", that a leader must not only be able to choose the right course of action, but must also be able to convince other people and draw them into the common struggle along the chosen course.

Vyacheslav Gorbachev showed the strength of his talent in his very first story, and he set a moral credo for his future works, the credo of the unity of "words" and "deeds", presented from two aspects—from the purely ethical and the romantic idealist points of view.

In the story "Haymaking" the teenage heroine, Lyubka, is subjected to vicious rumours about her stepfather, rumours which eventually lead to a rift within the family.

In "Bow to the Earth" the hero Volnov suffers a personal tragedy when his fiancée dies. He returns to his native town in central Russia to honour the memory of the dead girl and to re-assess his own life and the lives of his friends. They are all still young, they had all had dreams and had vowed to make a great deal of their lives, but what has become of the words?

Can ideals and intentions withstand the test of growing to maturity? This is perhaps the main question which Gorbachev asks throughout his works.

The style of "Haymaking" and "Bow to the Earth" was undoubtedly influenced by traditional Russian romantic prose.

Gorbachev writes with a fluent, clear style, and the reader feels that he is an eye-witness, he

experiences the events as they unfold upon the characters.

Take, for example, a descriptive passage from "Haymaking":

"Almost unnoticed, dusk had darkened into night. On the slopes the jagged outline of the woods stood out black against the greying sky. The cuckoo had ceased its call, and the corn-crake now raised its voice only in short, infrequent bursts. But the roar of engines on the main road was growing. A car's headlamps came to life, the broad beams of light cut through the mist and threw themselves on the steep clay of the far bank. A man's voice said: 'See you, Misha', a car door closed to with a bang and someone drove away. The beams of light swung from side to side, lit up a patch of willow shrub, and at the top of the slope they momentarily glared at a tree which had been battered by the storm. In the distance the rear lights of the car showed for a while behind the bushes, and then everything was quiet. The only sound left was at the well in the village, as an empty bucket clattered its way down to the bottom. Even at this time of night it was not too late to fetch water."

The 1970's were marked for Gorbachev by the publication of his impressive novel *Beyond the Arctic Blizzards.*

The setting is the Polar regions of Siberia, where a hydroelectric power station is being built amid the permafrost. The young characters in the story are our contemporaries.

The action moves quickly, hurrying on to its dynamic finale, where the author cuts through the Gordian knot of the various conflicts and motifs.

So-called "work-situation" novels, in which the writer gives a fully professional and yet at the same time popularised picture of the workings of an airport or a hospital, are quite in vogue at

present, as witnessed by the works of Arthur Hailey. And if a person wishes to learn about the construction of a hydroelectric power station, he is unlikely to find a more lively or stimulating source than Gorbachev's *Beyond the Arctic Blizzards.*

The author shows the history of the power station from the laying of the first stone to the final closing of the river. We see the details and the problems of the project, we see the conflicts which arise, and we see the characters—from the project director and the chief engineer to the drivers and the canteen workers.

But it is only fair to point out that in this novel the author does not merely show his mastery of the art of intrigue and his knowledge of the construction world. The novel has features which are more significant than the literary merits mentioned above and which touch upon the very essence of the "work-situation" novel in contemporary Soviet literature, in particular that part of contemporary Soviet literature which has been without its leader and guiding light since Vil Lipatov's "Tale of the Director Pronchatov" and Oleg Kuvaev's *The Territory.*

Gorbachev, in *Beyond the Arctic Blizzards,* is not merely drawing a picture of a modern Soviet construction site, he is drawing his picture as a deliberate metaphor of the spirit of contemporary Soviet life, and he does not hide the fact that his power station is as much a symbol as a reality.

For Gorbachev's characters the building of the power station is equivalent to building their own personalities, each discovering a new person within himself.

In a work such as this where the ordinary—as it were, superficial—narrative holds a second, allegorical significance, and where the romantic symbolism provides a permanent accompaniment

to the basic narrative, a great deal depends on the author's ability to base his sub-text on a wide-ranging concept of sufficient social relevance.

Among the many images and ideas in the narrative, one of the most imposing elements is the figure of the scientist Malyshev. He is an embodiment of the author's major theme, he knows his job, he assesses each situation as it arises and he can discern his path far ahead.

"In scientific circles, the name of Tikhon Svetozarovich Malyshev was associated not only with the Moskva-Volga Canal, but with the Serpukhov Synchrophasotron, with the University on Lenin Hills, with the first atomic power station, with the Bratsk Hydroelectric Power Station and many other construction projects for the national economy." As a contrast to Malyshev, Gorbachev shows us Khoteyev, a most competent organiser, but a careerist. It is inevitable that Basov, a young engineer and a pupil of Malyshev, comes into regular conflict with the disciples of Khoteyev.

The conflict does, of course, involve the use of underhand polemical tricks, but Gorbachev lays far more stress on the spiritual battle, the battle of "schools", the battle for the right to say what may be achieved in life, and how. The "Khoteyev boys" have done nothing in general terms, they have done nothing in science, and it seems that they are incapable of doing anything. And when they begin to consider how they may rise to the crest of the technological revolution they fail to realise that this revolution is not a wave and that the crest is, in any case, made up of useless froth and foam. The power station encounters difficulties not so much because of anybody's mistakes, but rather because of the attitude of the Khoteyev "camp", their haste to sign off their part of the project, and their willingness to pull the wool over

other people's eyes and to blow their own trumpets.

In spite of all this, however, it is Basov who wins the day, and it is probably with the character of Basov that Gorbachev finds his brightest hope.

It would seem that the author has drawn an entirely new psychological type, and has drawn him with great care in the reality of Soviet life at the end of the 1970's.

I prefer to see Basov, however, as a newer, more developed version of Lipatov's Pronchatov, a Pronchatov after a further stage of social development, a Pronchatov who has experienced the beginning of the technological revolution.

Whereas Lipatov's hero was an expression of the younger generation's desire to take on the mantle of power and authority, Basov no longer has to defend his moral right to his position of authority: no one has any doubts about that right.

What for Pronchatov was a hurdle, for Basov is in the past. Pronchatov, while remaining a romantic and a dreamer at heart, was forced—for the good of the work which had to be done—to trample on his idealism in the eyes of others, and to make himself out to be a pragmatist. But for Basov pragmatism is a long outmoded stage of economic development.

Basov has to contend with Gatilin, a man who would at first glance appear to be on his side, rather than against him. But Gatilin is a typical manager, a man who has risen from the position of administrator and who, in his new and higher position, has remained a good administrator, well capable of organising the work, given the available resources. In Gorbachev's novel, Gatilin becomes a barrier for Basov because he—Gatilin—cannot stimulate a creative atmosphere. Time is moving on, and the person required as manager should not

merely be an administrator, but a "generator of ideas"—in this case, Basov.

Basov is needed for the job: thanks to his bold initiative the power station is built several months before schedule and at a saving of millions. But even more, Basov is needed by people, by the young people who have joined the project to "make something of themselves". He is able to encourage the creative impulses of each and every one of the workers on the project because he himself is a creator, a natural example to follow, without idle talk or sham, and because he knows that without encouragement creative ideas will evaporate into thin air. He notices, for instance, initiative on the part of Borodulin, a driver, just one of the lads, but a lad with a head on his shoulders; and he fully supports this initiative. And he understands Borodulin's blunders, which he looks upon as the natural results of "negative experiments" (this term, in scientific research, refers to the means of finding a positive result by testing a number of deviations from the norm, and thereby learning from the negative results achieved).

Gorbachev has succeeded in giving his narrative a highly emotive tone by creating a convincing image of the inspired contemporary hero, who serves, moreover, as a focal point for all the other positive characters of the novel.

The romantic, allegorical style of the first chapter, the author's song of praise to the North and to the Nganasani people, to whom the Soviets brought new life; the story of the land convoy, struggling through the icy silence of the north, bringing new lifeblood to the frozen construction site; the dramatic descriptions of the tales of love withstanding the trials of the northern wastes—all this is not a departure from the overall tone of the narrative, but is a natural complement to the story of Mulyshev, Basov and the people around them.

In this novel the author creates a happy blend of technical and personal success.

Beyond the Arctic Blizzards is dedicated to the generation which has today taken on the role of managing the Soviet economic system, a generation which not only wants to manage well, but wants to manage well in the socialist manner and in accordance with the highest moral ideals.

Alexander BAIGUSHEV

Translated by Graham Whittaker

BEYOND THE ARCTIC BLIZZARDS

I

No one knows why one river falls into another and why the second falls into the sea, and no one can change the water's course. But the Russians came to the tundra and built a town on the first river. They gave it a fine name, Barakhsan, which means the joy and happiness of life, and they said, "Now we shall make a sea here!.." And Kasendu Vantulyaku, the Nganasani trapper, laughed at them. How were they going to stop the river, when even the cliffs of the Great Rapids had not stemmed it?

Kasendu Vantulyaku thought about the wisdom of his ancestors. They had been able to put such strength into their precepts and behests, that their words had come down clear to this day from the darkness of the remote past and so they would go on into the future.

Sing praise to the wind that bears your sail along, said one of the proverbs. It had preserved the wisdom of a once numerous people that had melted on the road of Time and History as the deep snow in the tundra melts in spring—only the slushy patches remain in the gloomy folds of the mountains. The memory of the generation had lost the name of the person who had pronounced the truth which even now taught the Nganasani not so much rivalry as naive cunning and the long-suffering tolerance of life. After all, how could it

be otherwise? The Land of Ice and Darkness under the midnight sky was seldom kind or merciful to man. Woe to anyone who did not acknowledge its eternal domination!

With submission to fate and with a determination worthy of astonishment and praise, Vantulyaku had been teaching the young ones the ancient laws of the tribe; but as time passed, the sayings of their ancestors were becoming more and more obscure to them. Avoiding the vagueness of the old style, Vantulyaku patiently drove it home that before leaving on a journey, a Nganasani should glorify and bless the task which he had decided to fulfil and the road along which he must go.

That behest had been observed without infringement from generation to generation. However, it seemed as though Kasendu had become its last guardian, although he had sons and grandsons, and the grandsons had sons of their own.

Vantulyaku's people, who numbered a few hundred in all, had once settled the vast and boundless Taimyr tundra from the Yenisei in the West to the Khatanga in the East... Their mother river, the full-flowing Pyasina, or Nyamy, had fed them with fish, the taiga and the tundra had given them reindeer, an abundance of fur-bearing animals, fowl and game. But terrible and invincible were the wrath and fury of the countless *koika*, or idols, who scourged the Nganasani with epidemics, famine and plague, lack of fodder for the reindeer and stormy weather. For a thousand years, the insatiable *koika* had destroyed thousands upon thousands of his fellow tribesfolk; it seemed that the very name of the last Nganasani was destined to vanish from the face of the earth, their cold and inhospitable mistress; but the little Nganasani went on leaving their seed in the tundra, ready to perish there rather than leave for alien, settled lands far, far away.

Old Vantulyaku's own grandfather had told him, as if reading from a page of the book containing the great mystery of the Nganasani people, that a black sunset awaited Kasendu in his declining years and perhaps he would be the last of the Nganasani, whose eyes would no one close and who would have no relatives to commit his body to the grave. Vantulyaku only half-believed this weird prophecy, sanctified by the oaths of an ancient ancestor, but the year after year, the plague, without arrows or bullets, mowed down the herds of reindeer, the tents thinned out on the camps and, seeing this, wiser now that his hair was white, Kasendu finally became reconciled to his fate, as harsh and inevitable as the sunset. If anything maintained the strength of the ailing Kasendu, it was simply that he must not die before the others, and so he lived on; after all, the few Nganasani tents were still wandering over the tundra and he waited long and patiently for the total silence of the people, as in a dark night when the winds of the north are weary of blowing and layers of snow-cloud wreath the mountain summits...

He took the death of those close to him with apparent calm, even with indifference, and to each, as he departed for another world, Vantulyaku would say in farewell, "Wait, and we shall come". But sometimes he would be overwhelmed with an unbearable sadness; he would put on his skis and, taking his father's bow and quiver with its winged arrows, he would walk a long way from the tent into the untrodden taiga, and it seemed strange to his family that such a doughty and deadly marksman could return without a bag. It was not so. He would track down the biggest and most powerful wild reindeer, or *shagzhoi,* and would sacrifice blood to the all-seeing *koika*: "Accept this offering from the patient Vantulyaku and may the people of my tribe live long in

happiness!.." The omnipotent *koika* would be silent—Gods do not hearken unto slaves—and so mutely without a hint of reproach, Kasendu awaited their punishment or their miracles.

For a long time he did not want to believe that a miracle had come from the *lyosa* Soviets, from the Russians who had established Soviet power in the Land of Ice and Darkness. In the hungriest year, when Kasendu himself was saying farewell to his native encampment, the Russians brought the Nganasani dry snow, the white flour, and the Nganasani began to boil porridge and eat bread, and they began to have children again, and only their legs, as the captious Vantulyaku noticed, were very thin and long, but that was nothing, he reasoned that they would run fast. The Nganasani were now known as a proud and independent people, except that some of them were withdrawn and gloomy, as in the old days, because of their oppressive thoughts; but these were the old men like Kasendu, who did not yet believe in the end of the *koika*. However, Kasendu Vantulyaku himself—if not uncaringly, then at least with ease, accepted the new system—the law of the *lyosa* about his old friends, the *koika*. Vantulyaku did not say, like the young ones, that there were no *koika* at all now; however, he reasoned, the Soviet incomers were clearly stronger than the *koika*, who were now serving them as the Nganasani had once served the *koika*. To Vantulyaku, all this meant that the campfires would blaze up on the old embers again, the smoke would rise high and there would be many weddings and merry dances.

However, the traditions of his ancestors were still the law of the re-established tribe, and whoever obeyed them always returned with a bag. Kasendu Vantulyaku said many times that it wasn't enough for the successful one to pick up the trail of a sable or fox; he must know the spell

according to which the sable, even if bald-headed and stupid, when you tracked it down and crept up to it, became the most fluffy, sparkling and good-natured beast and wasn't that sable any more, but the king of sables! The magic spells and words of praise would spellbind the animal and if, before leaving your tent or your lonely bivouac for the night, you sang merrily and said the magic words over the flames of the campfire, the king of sables himself would come to your snare or trap, or would find your decoy and stop the well-aimed arrow if you had one in your quiver.

Kasendu Vantulyaku had many sons; five were still living, and each had five sons and five girls, and they had now all become fathers and mothers, and their children, even the sickly ones, were not dying off, as in the old days, but were cured by medical assistants or the white doctor and were becoming like young reindeer, or bulging-eyed *tuguti*, bounding friskily on their still spindly legs.

Kasendu loved his grandchildren. He had reared them as an old wolf reared her cubs and had taught them to shoot and track; but his children's children and their children as little ones knew the way to school better than the one to the herd, and were learning the mystery, incomprehensible to the old man, of the little black signs on the white paper. In hunting, they relied less on the spells of their ancestors than on the bullet that could outstrip the wind.

Yes, when the Soviet newcomers came to the tundra, the usual course of life was changed.

It came about that for many years now no one had called Kasendu by his own name; the whole Arctic tundra knew him as Konstantin Vantulyaku, and the old man, with much groaning and grumbling, finally accepted it. He became used to the Russian name, although he thought to himself that Kasendu was certainly no worse than the Russian Konstantin. He thought for a long time

and eventually realised that the new name was just like a new person. If there was a Konstantin, it meant there was no Kasendu any more, and so this naive awareness released Konstantin from the sacred behest of his ancestors that he should be the last to leave this earth, and the old man, weary of life, on any day without sorrow in his heart could close the eyes that had seen much grief. True, Vantulyaku was in no hurry to do this. He wanted Konstantin to live a little longer than Kasendu.

As the years went by the old man began to feel proud of his second name. After all, when you are sitting on your sledge and, while the blizzard howls, you reflectively and endlessly repeat in various modes, "Kon-styan-tin Van-tu-lya-ku, Van-tu-lya-ku Kon-styan-tin, Kon-styan-tin Van-tu-lya-ku..." It's as if that jingling tambourine was playing the refrain of a farewell song that the whole Arctic tundra had taken up from young to old. Only one man was consumed by envy and spite, doddery old Spiridon the shaman, but that bald devil had long forgotten how to cast spells and had even forgotten his own memory.

Old Kasendu-Konstantin Vantulyaku had long been accustomed to greeting the birth of a new day with a quiet thought about the world, about the immeasurable vastness of earth or the mystery of the celestial bodies, and then, if his hands and eyes were busy with the customary work, if the clever *vachazhny*, or leading reindeer, was pulling the sledge along the right path, if the dogs were obedient to the voice of the driver and the sharp pole, if the hollowed-out log-boat, rocking like a goose-quill on the water, sped smoothly over the Rapids, Konstantin Vantulyaku could allow himself to fall a-thinking, and then the train of his thoughts would seem to follow his morning thoughts, would go as unswervingly as the banks follow the stream to give way only at the sea,

since they are unable to embrace what is as unencompassable as the sky itself.

He often wondered where his thoughts come from. But the answer was still a mystery: old Vantulyaku only knew that the dark night and his sleep in the night were like the mossy hummock under which the slow rivulets of thought accumulate and then trickle out. That is why, Konstantin believed, lest they grow stagnant and be ruined in his head, wherever a man might go to sleep, he should lay his hand under his cheek and push a rolled-up reindeer-skin under his head... And, perhaps, there was wisdom in this naive likening of thoughts to running water, for Konstantin knew perfectly well that yesterday's thought cannot possibly be caught, like a fish that slips out of your hand into the depths of the pool.

Yes, he had lived a long time on this earth, although he did not know exactly how many years. How could you measure earthly years?.. His advanced old age and life itself seemed to Konstantin Vantulyaku like a prolonged trip across the tundra on which he had greeted and said goodbye to the sun many, many times. How many? It all depended on how you rode. With mangy, starving dogs, ten *kyoss*[1] full would be built up, but with lively, strong dogs, eight *kyoss* would be enough... Of his five sons, the youngest had already greeted the young sun four times ten less two. As many as that! During the last population census, Konstantin Vantulyaku was written down as being ninety years of age; but he remembered more suns than that, and this delighted him, like a little ruse which he had kept hidden from the census form.

...Vantulyaku was thinking about all these things as he squatted by the sinking fire, feeding it

[1] *Kyoss*—about ten kilometres.—*Ed.*

with dry brushwood to boil tea. When the flame blazed up and the tea was ready, Konstantin would think hard and long about the river on which he must sail; he would remember its gentle names, would sing it an ancient hymn of glory and only then would he push his light craft away from the bank.

He was now on the upper reaches of the Aniva, a long way from the Great Rapids, but also as far away from his home, his native camp on Lake Vachug, or the Upper Lake, as the incomers called it. Konstantin considered wrong this Russian name; it brought a certain disorder into the everyday life of the tundra, and he wanted to say this to the *lyosa* chief in Barakhsan. After all, they (to him, the chief was a large number of people, many, many *lyosa*) ought to know that there were more rivers and lakes beyond Vachug. True, not as big, but even so, Vachug could not be called "Upper". It would be better to call it Reindeer in Russian, for that name came from the camp of Vachug where the riding reindeer always stopped for the night.

The flame was blazing up quickly and the kettle, placed directly on the coals, was already beginning to bubble and wheeze with pleasure. The old man charmed it with talk and cunning, not forgetting to push in some dry wood from the sides.

"However you, too, Globe of Earth," he said to the kettle "are old. Your hide darker than mine. But you think you're much cleverer than me, and when embers burn you, you are a little bit nasty. But you're clever only once—when you really get nasty, like our Spiridon, and then you stop talking to me. And Konstantin would stop talking. You're clever, you'll start to spit boiling water. Then, friend, so be it, I shall drink all the water out of you, and you'll warm my bones, and I'll say: 'You are good and clever'. Konstantin will take you with him, he will put you in a boat and

quickly-quickly we'll visit the *lyosa* at the Great Rapids... The *lyosa* have Barakhsan there—who was it that said 'Barakhsan'? Why, it was me, Vantulyaku, that said Barakhsan..."

The old man's parchment face beamed when he saw that the kettle was listening to his persuasions and, hissing steam, it suddenly bubbled angrily and in haste, so that even its lid went awry. The coals smoked as the water splashed on to them.

Konstantin gripped the hot handle, but his senile fingers did not feel the heat of the iron. He took the kettle off the fire and put it beside his pack, which contained his sugar, salt and other victuals. It was a long time ago, recalled Ventulyaku, since the red tent and the red tent girl had appeared for the first time in his native camp on Lake Vachug, and he had called the teapot an earthly globe. And with good reason.

The beautiful *lyosa* woman had brought the red tent. Only Spiridon, hissing at her like a malignant kettle, had put fear into the hearts of the people. A plague would come from the woman, the reindeer would trip and fall and the clever *koika* would send the *kocha*[1]. However, the incomer woman knew how to chase away the *kocha*, but Spiridon did not, and so the people listened to her. The beautiful *lyosa*'s name was Malya Kazanora. She told them what Soviet incomers were and who Lenin was. She said that there were many, many people on earth, and they were brothers, and that their *moü*, the Earth, was certainly not an enormous beast covered with the fleece of the taiga and the tundra, as the Nganasani believed,

[1] *Kocha*—according to the Nganasani tradition, an evil spirit, a disease fatal to reindeer. This illness is now known as epizootic and no longer does appalling damage, since the infected members of the herd are separated from the healthy ones and the reindeer are driven to new pastures.—*Ed.*

but a round ball in the air, and it turned round and round without stopping, like a toy top. How could anyone believe that? If the Earth was turning, the reindeer wouldn't be able to stand on his feet, the Nganasani wouldn't be able to keep their balance, and Malya Kazanora's skirt would fly up... Never mind Kazanora—the rivers would run dry, the lakes would empty and tents and reindeer would vanish from the earth, like a stone falling into an abyss. Then there would be much *yamaly-kumansei*, much grief among the Nganasani... However, the Nganasani made up their own minds, never had Kazanora laughed so heartily at them...

And, indeed, to prove that she was right Malya Kazanora, or Amalia Mikhailovna Khazanovich, a true Siberian and inhabitant of the Arctic, the first educational and cultural worker among the Nganasani, fetched a bucket of water and said, "Watch!"

She swung the bucket up and began to whirl it round in her outstretched hand. Not a drop of water was spilt. True, the spectators were going to run away at first, but when they saw that the water was not spilling over, they crowded round Malya and even risked trying it themselves.

"However, yes," they admitted, "it is so, however. The Earth indeed turns round."

Konstantin went silently into his tent. He had no bucket; the cauldron was too awkward to spin round, so he picked up the kettle, filled it to the brim and threw the lid down at his feet. Now he had his globe of Earth. "Water," said Vantulyaku to himself, "this is Lake Vachug! However, will it begin to spill over if the Earth turns round?.." Vantulyaku swung the kettle up and spilled half the contents on to his head. So, he said to himself, the woman is a real liar!.. His *moü*, his Earth isn't turning at all. However, it lies on its side a little, for the rivers flow!

Although Vantulyaku had reasoned correctly, he still had doubts. With his own eyes he had seen

Malya spin the bucket. He decided to try again. This time, he swung the kettle so violently that he couldn't stop, and then someone lifted the tent flap. It was Malya herself.

"Well, Vantulyaku, does it turn after all?"

"It turns, only not the kettle, but the globe of Earth!.."

Much else did the curious and restless Konstantin Vantulyaku pick up from Kazanora, but he never did learn to read and write. The main thing was that he understood what the baffling hooks and rings of letters were for on the sheet of the newspaper.

Vantulyaku is looking at the snow, let's say, and he sees a trail: one reindeer has passed by—young, or old, or it's a *vazhenka* with a young reindeer, or a herd has passed by—many, many reindeer. And Vantulyaku can tell how many reindeer have passed, whether they have fed well or are hungry, whether they were going fast or slow, where they were going, and where from, and whether they had been there long. Vantulyaku could tell from these tracks everything that a skilful hunter ought to know. Why? Because each reindeer and all reindeer together leave their particular trail.

So it is with the *lyosa.* Each Russian has a trail and leaves it on the paper in the form of tiny black squiggles, and when there are many trails, Kazanora will look and be able to say what people are doing all over the *moü,* and on his land also. You need only know the words, and although he had learned how to maintain some converse with the *lyosa,* Vantulyaku would never remember all the words. However, he thought in self-consolation, Malya Kazanora could not spell the trail of a *vachazhny* reindeer.

But what of it!.. The red tent girl soon learned to harness reindeer and stop the sledge with the pole; and he, Konstantin Vantulyaku, had shown

her how to sit in a boat and how to hold the oar so as not to capsize the craft with a sudden movement. For the woman had got in and overturned the boat.

"However, does it turn?" he asked as he gave her his hand.

"It turns, Vantulyaku, it turns," she replied, coming ashore out of the water. And she laughed, remembering why he had said this. "Just like your globe of Earth!"

Almost forgetting about the kettle in the midst of his reminiscences, Vantulyaku took off the lid and dropped a piece of loaf sugar into the globe of Earth. While the boiled water was cooling down, he stuffed some tobacco into his long pipe, cut while he was still a young man from the sturdy root of a larch-tree, and pushed a coal as small as vixen's eye into the bowl. It was no sin to have a smoke before a journey...

He took a series of short pulls, puffing out the smoke. At this point, he was alerted by an indistinct rustling noise. He listened intently. The branches of larch-trees were rustling steadily in the damp wind; but somewhere by the bank some brushwood crackled under an incautious foot. "Neither bird nor beast"—which meant it was a human being.

After the rustling, the wind brought the smells of his native camp; only the reindeer could detect them, and from the impatient way in which the person on the bank was dragging the boat ashore, Vantulyaku knew that he was being visited by a young traveller. But no one had been intending to come down from Lake Vachug; his sons and his grandsons had been trying to dissuade him from making such a difficult journey in his old age. Vantulyaku had ignored them and left. Who knows, he had sighed, saying nothing and looking at his worried family from under his eyebrows, perhaps this was Konstantin Vantulyaku's last

hunting expedition. Would he ever go from the great Yenisei to the hoary spurs of the Komogu-Moü Range or sit with a ready arrow where the swift Dudypta falls into the River Nyama? Perhaps the saddened Vantulyaku did not want to admit to himself that this time it was not hunting trophies that were luring him on his long journey.

Vantulyaku's eight-year-old granddaughter, the sempstress Nachyupte, or Natasha, wept without wiping away her tears. The old man alone understood why she was crying. He said to her, and to her only:

"Wait, Nachyupte. You must wait. I shall bring you porcelain beads."

Of what other present could the beautiful little Nachyupte dream? She wiped her tears away with the palm of her hand, smearing them with the snot all over her cheek and nodding silently.

The old man thought a little longer and said:

"However, there are going to be heavy snows this winter. You will not be riding much on the reindeer. You will be staying much at home. So, Nachyupte, sew *bakari* for Vantulyaku."

Oh, a pair of beautiful, comfortable *bakari* had long been Vantulyaku's dream. Fur boots came higher and were warmer, but Konstantin wanted *bakari*. The girl would stitch them out of soft reindeer-foot skin and would decorate them with pieces of many-coloured fur. Vantulyaku would be the only man in the tundra with such patterns, such beautiful footwear. If only Nachyupte really took the trouble.

His stern relatives were silent, not asking where Vantulyaku would get the beads, since they were unobtainable even in the city. They said nothing, understanding and not refusing Vantulyaku his last wish. Silent, too, were the ancient *koika*, as if waiting: their hour had come. But it was too early!.. The old man had fooled them all. If Nachyupte was going to wait for her beads, white

as sugar and snow, then she would also be waiting for Vantulyaku. She would think about him, and this would safeguard him from mishaps on his journey. Wait, Nachyupte; Vantulyaku is sure to come back with beads. Only wait patiently. Wait for your Vantulyaku every day!

Konstantin Vantulyaku knew where he was going and why.

Perhaps he wanted to convince himself for the last time that even today the tundra was living by its eternal law and the wild reindeer herds had not forgotten the ancient trail on which Vantulyaku had greeted and said farewell to many suns, like his grandfather and his grandfather's father.

It was the path of life.

The herds went along that trail twice a year, with the rising and setting of the Arctic sun.

In spring, the full-grown male, his head weighed down by branched antlers, led his wild and turbulent tribe northwards into the tundra towards which the eyes of the reindeer had strained during the winter, as also their quivering nostrils and their swift feet that can overtake the wind. The snows were already melting quickly in the tundra, the reindeer moss was green, and only the scent of the still unopened buds on the wild rosemary bushes stirred and intoxicated the hot blood. And towards this fragrance, towards the far horizon, dark blue with wet snows, the thin-legged *lon-shaki*, the *vazhenki*, the bucking young *vondelki* and the old, trembling *khaptarki* hastened after their leader.

In autumn, after trampling hundreds and thousands of kilometres of meadow pastures with their hooves, the herds would turn back to the taiga, and again their eternal landmark would be the Komogu-Moü Range. At the foothills of Komogu-Moü, the guardian of sacred thoughts, Konstantin Vantulyaku, the oldest of the Nganasani people, must sit in the sallow bushes, holding

his breath and, hugging the ground, he would feel the excited weight of hot bodies huddled into an avalanche and would tremble at the throaty whistle and the mad thunder of hooves.

He would spare only the leader, so that his journey should be peaceful, free and eternal.

...Meanwhile, the unexpected guest, who bore the odours of the Lake Vachug camp and walked with the gait of a young reindeer, was already coming up to the campfire. He was walking hurriedly and lightly. After all, Vantulyaku himself had stepped lightly in his younger years—more warily, however, but this one was crashing head-on through the bushes without cunning or concealment. Or perhaps that was his cunning—to warn the old man of his arrival. If so, Vantulyaku could say that coming up to the fire was none other than...

Invisible, but already recognised, the guest had yet not spoken a word of the usual tundra greeting or emerged from the darkness into the firelight, when Vantulyaku said mildly:

"Come to me, Vova Tokko!"

It was his grandson; he had forgotten which one in order of succession, but it was his favourite, the son of his youngest son.

Great rivers are filled by small waters. Is it not so in the world and the life of man—the big is made up of the small? It had not been hard for Kasendu Vantulyaku to understand this law, but it was hard to think what was waiting for his people on the road of Time.

The boundless, harsh tundra, the rim of which a Nganasan could not see even from the summit of Mount Komogu-Moü, had remained the same one that his grandfathers and great-grandfathers had known. However, much had already changed in the Arctic, in this northern land, with the arrival of the indefatigable Soviet *lyosa*.

Was it not strange and surprising that young *tuguty* who had not yet set foot on the sacred slopes of Komogu-Moü should have already seen more of the world than their forebears? They had already heard the songs of other peoples, and already another mountain peak somewhere far away was luring the young men a long way away from their homeland. If old Kasendu Vantulyaku was not mistaken in his forebodings, then it meant the time was approaching when the young ones would begin leaving their family nests. What was in store for them out there in the future?

When it leaves the nest, a bird may gather strength in flight, but it may also fall and break its wings... The thought would not have saddened Vantulyaku so much if he had known that the children would come back and the land of his fathers would not be forgotten by the proud sons. Would the one now approaching the night campfire be sure of the return journey?

Everything in this world had its own meaning for Vantulyaku, its own purpose—hidden sometimes, perhaps. The appearance of his fifteen-year-old grandson Vova Tokko did not so much surprise the old man as delighed him—so, in any case, it should seem to the boy. Brisk, big-boned, in a close-fitting parka, incredibly long-legged, he led Vantulyaku from the path of gloom on to the one of joyful thoughts. Vantulyaku did not care to recall how the chairman had come into his tent and had said glumly:

"Vantulyaku, stay here, stay one day, stay another. There'll be good weather, there'll be a helicopter; you'll fly straight to the Nyama, to Komogu-Moü, to Dudypta. Why walk? You're old for walking, especially alone, and to go too far is to walk badly."

There wasn't much respect for the old nowadays. His grandfathers had taught badly, very badly.

Why, only fifteen years back, everything had been different.

That was when the chairman assembled the people and said:

"Who's our best hunter?"

"Vantulyaku!" said the people.

"Correct," confirmed the chairman. "Who's taken the most sables?"

"Vantulyaku!" said the people.

"Yes," agreed the chairman again. "And who's taken more reindeer and silver fox, hares apart?"

"Vantulyaku!" said the people again.

And the chairman agreed with the people and laughed delightedly. Then he opened the newspaper and read out a Decree awarding the Nganasani Konstantin Vantulyaku the Order of Lenin for great services in fur-trapping.

Another man stood up, a big *lyosa* chief in a parka of smooth black material. He pinned an Order on Vantulyaku's chest, gave him the little empty box, shook him by the hand and began applauding.

The people clapped loudly too, and so did the chairman, and it was just as in a film. The Nganasani studied the Order with Lenin on it. And someone said that Lenin looked like Vantulyaku. Vantulyaku smoothed the lines on his waxen face and agreed. Yes, there was a likeness...

Good news in the tundra overtakes the fastest sledge, and reindeer, and dog, and bird.

The North's best hunters came to congratulate Vantulyaku. There were Chukchi rich in reindeer, Dolgan brothers and Yakut brothers, Evenks rode in on their reindeer, and there were smiling Yukagirs—Oduli, people, who had fallen from the sky. Vantulyaku's tent was open to all, and the word *barakhsan* was heard on all tongues honouring him: *barakhsan* means "good". And Vantulyaku's fame went even as far as the sea.

However, as Konstantin thought at the time,

intoxicated with joy as he was, if all the guests were put into sleighs, the result would be an enormous *argish*, or caravan, of the kind in which the aborigenes roam the tundra in autumn. The first team would already be out in the taiga, and the last would still be standing in his camp...

"Do something, Vantulyaku," said all the friends and guests.

At this point, Vantulyaku's youngest son came up.

"Father, a grandson has been born to you, the son of your son."

"Let him be Lenin," decided Vantulyaku proudly.

They were both overjoyed and doubtful at the festive table. After all ... Lenin. They went to the chairman. He sent them to the snub-nosed teacher who had come all the way from Moscow.

"If a girl is born," she murmured, blushing for some reason, "it would be a good thing to call her Lena. Lenochka... Pretty, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is, it is!"

"But it would be better to call a little boy Volodya, Volodya, Vladimir, the same as Lenin... After all, he was Vladimir Ilyich!.."

Together with the happy father and grandfather (and no one knows which of them was happier), she went to have a look at the lusty little boy, and over the cot she called him:

"Vova, pretty little boy, Vovochka, Vova!"

Oh, how he bellowed at the time! What lungs!

"Anyway, he can hear," said Vantulyaku delightedly.

From that moment, the little Tokko was known to the northern tundra as Vova Tokko.

...He walked up to the campfire, slightly out of breath, and waited for his grandfather to invite him.

"What are you standing there for, Vova? The Globe of Earth is warm, it doesn't want to wait

any longer. We'll warm ourselves. But it's a long, long journey..."

From what the old man had just said, Vova grasped that whatever news he might have brought, Vantulyaku would not turn back now.

The young man brightened up noticeably.

The conversation between Vantulyaku and Vova Tokko, at first calm and unhurried, had the tone sanctified for such meetings by custom and the traditions of the northern tribe. Vova had only left his native camp a day later, and he did not omit to tell first and foremost about the good health and cares of his relatives. The old man thought it strange that his grandson did not bring greetings from anyone; but from this something else became clear—namely that his grandson Tokko was not intending to meet him.

"Nachyupte is waiting for you," said Tokko, and these were precious words to the old man.

Vantulyaku nodded in silence, sucked at his pipe and went on listening and thinking. Fate, however, was merciful to him. Because of the meeting with Tokko, the parting with home seemed a day shorter. That was good.

They talked about the forthcoming hunting expedition and about what looked like being a winter of heavy snows. There had not been much northern lightning in the sky that autumn. It had been overcast even in the daytime, when the sun should be shining all the time; it was as if there were going to be rains and then blizzards. There had been times when unexpected snowstorms, even with hail, had caught the reindeer herds far from the taiga, in the tundra that was bare as Spiridon's bald pate, and many animals had perished.

Vantulyaku learned from his grandson that the first ice was moving down the Aniva from Lake Vachug, "However..." He shook his head and marvelled that he had not heard it. But there was

no mystery about it; the old man had selected a camping site for the night in a bend in the river and had climbed high on to the bank. Of course, the ice brought the chill of the lake with it, but Vantulyaku was so warm in his reindeer-skin sleeping bag that the cold didn't affect him at all. "Even so, old bones need much warmth," he sighed. With the bitterness of a man who had endured many hardships, he thought how many cares he had acquired with old age. Why wasn't it the other way round?

By now they had drunk the tea and the young Tokko finished his pipe. It was evidently time to be going, but for some reason they did not feel the lightness and decisiveness with which the Nganasani sets off on a journey.

"The water does not like heavy thoughts," said Vantulyaku casually, as if talking to himself.

Vova Tokko understood and replied:

"Your son and my father does not know where I'm bound."

"He may know after all, but he didn't like his son leaving home... Oh, foolish legs of the youngsters!"

Konstantin had seen so much of everything in his time that his eyes darkened, his head went dry with thoughts—it was all bone, not a head, and it was as heavy with memories as a bag of small-shot. Vantulyaku scowled ominously. Tokko sat before him, offended and with a guilty look on his face. Since the time that the Nganasani people had been born out of reindeer hair, there had not been a more grievous sin on earth than to desecrate the customs of one's ancestors. The custom was simple, but if you violated it, the sin was great: the one leaving the tribe did not go away empty: either a curse held him back like a lassoo, or a blessing went before him. Then even the wrath of the *koika* could not overpower him.

"Vantulyaku," said his grandson, "I'm going to Barakhsan."

"We have one road," replied the old man, hoping for agreement. If the lad was fed up with the camp or someone had offended him, let the *lyosa* girls play at will with the stripling; let the fire of the white lightning, with which the Russians cut iron, flash in the eyes of the Nganasani and burn the arrogance out of them. Then, Nganasani, you will want to go back to the tent... If so, Vantulyaku would give Tokko his blessing for the journey on his own behalf and on behalf of his son, the father of this young stag.

"I was thinking," continued Vova, "that I wouldn't find you there, in Barakhsan, but you were not in such a hurry. I plied my oar day and all night. Your bonfire stopped me, and your words, Vantulyaku, warmed my heart. Know, Vantulyaku, that I go to the *lyosa* not as a visitor. I shall be a brother to them and I shall be master there as you are master of the reindeer. And even though I may have left the camp against my family's wishes, I am a Nganasani and I shall stay so forever. You hear, Vantulyaku? This I, Vova Tokko, say to you!.."

"Well, so be it. But when will you return to the tent?"

"This means that I spoke badly and you did not understand me, Vantulyaku! The cold sea, and the tundra, the Yenisei and Nyama rivers, the Komogu-Moü and the Aniva from end to end are my land. Here, everywhere is my house, my home and my hearth. Barakhsan stands on my land. You gave it a name, and it is your town, Kasendu, is it not then my town? Think, are you not master of all by which the Nganasani are rich in the tundra?"

"I am the master of the reindeer," repeated Vantulyaku after his grandson, "But what about you, Vova?"

"I shall be master of the iron tundra."

"The what tundra?"

"The one you called Barakhsan. The incomer Basov says you are godfather to this town," insisted the restless Tokko, trying to anticipate his grandfather's objections. "I can live there too!"

"Not so fast," interrupted the old man stiffly. "The Russians gave me a gift. I said, 'Good, barakhsan.' I gave them sables and again I said, 'Barakhsan.' Where have I ever heard that our barakhsan is their Barakhsan?" He even seemed surprised.

"It doesn't matter," repeated Vova firmly. "It's my *moü*, my land. I shall build a hydroelectric station. The incomer Basov will put fire into my hands. And I shall make it so that there shall be sunshine in the tundra in winter and it will be as warm as by day."

"Ah, but we've heard all that before... *Lyosa* Basov, *lyosa* Basov, *lyosa* beautiful maid Anya—that's who's talking now, not Vova Tokko. How can you give up your tongue to an alien head?.. No, Vantulyaku will never understand that!"

And Vantulyaku protested to his grandson.

"The Nganasani knows the tundra, the *lyosa* does not know the tundra. The Nganasani takes every kind of animal, but *lyosa* Basov is sorry for it. Another *lyosa*, Gatilin, shoots the reindeer when the *maut*[1] holds his antlers. What can they teach you? Why should the Nganasani want the sun in the winter-time? He needs snow, the wind, reindeer, not iron..."

"No," replied Vova glumly.

"And another thing I know; *lyosa* Anya has kindled a coal in your heart, but you're just a stripling to her. You're still young. She cannot be a wife to you, not a mother—only a sister.

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[1] *Maut*—a kind of lassoo. The Nganasani use it for breaking in reindeer.— *Ed.*

However,"—the old man hesitated—"tell me, Vova, who will pasture the reindeer? Who will bring in the silver fox?.. As for Vantulyaku, to whom shall he give the bow and arrows of his grandfather's father?"

His head bowed, Tokko was silent for a long time.

Brave in heart as the eagle of the steppe, he soared high and fearlessly on the wings of dream. Who could compare with him in his desire to become the conqueror of secrets, of heaven and earth, the secrets of the tundra? He, Tokko, would lay electric cables to his native camp and tents, he would melt the ice, he would mine gold and diamonds in the bowels of the earth, and the reindeer herds, still untouched by man, would begin to graze on eternally green pastures. Only the sombre Komogu-Moü would remember the path of death... So it would be, so the geography teacher had said at school; all the Nganasani need do was to study hard and make such a life with their own hands. Vova Tokko had strong hands. His *maut,* like a bullet, never missed, and without leaving his place, Tokko would bring a proud reindeer to its knees. Only Tokko's bullet would find the squirrel's ear! Who overtook the fox on swift fur-lined skis? Who did not fear the cold of Lake Vachug and walked over the bottom as if on the ground? There was no Nganasani like him in the tundra. The teacher had told his father that Tokko should be sent to Leningrad or Moscow. He would become a vet or chairman of a collective farm. But his father did not want to insult the chairman, the brother of his wife and Tokko's mother. Let Vova pasture the reindeer, he said. Let the reindeer be pastured by someone feeble-minded—that's what Vova Tokko decided. (And that unforgivable outburst of temper was forgiven him solely because of his youth!) Vova Tokko would work and he would study. His father

disagreed. The engineer, said he, lived in the city and the vet lived in the tundra. A Nganasani cannot live without the tundra. However, Vova Tokko would show them all. Tokko was not leaving the tundra... If his father had not understood, would Vantulyaku understand, who was as old as the antiquated and ridiculous *koika*?..

Without hearing his grandson's answer and without intruding on his reflections, Konstantin Vantulyaku looked back on his life from the height of an arrow that has been shot high into the sky.

Was there a man among the Nganasani more valiant and brave than he?

No, such a man had not been born.

Was there among the Nganasani a man as obedient to the laws of the tribe and as loyal to the little black idols, the *koika*, that were omnipotent in their wrath?

No.

But there was not a man in the northern tundra who had despised more behests than he!..

Who had been first to laugh at the *koika*?

The wicked Kasendu Vantulyaku.

Who had put the red tent girl in his boat and given her an oar?

The foolish Vantulyaku.

No one in the tundra could commit a more terrible sin than that of desecrating his grandfather's memory. He, Konstantin Vantulyaku, had turned his face away from his behest, and now the Nganasani root of life would not go with Vantulyaku into the grave.

Would a man be found here capable of reproaching Vantulyaku for this and scattering the ashes of shame on his head?.. There is no such person, as there is no Nganasani who is the enemy of his tribe!

And if not, then for a sin worthy of great forgiveness, let him be forgiven his other sins—the sins of Vantulyaku himself and all his kin!

The long summer has more dull days than the short one. So it is with the long life.

"What am I to say to you, Vova Tokko, my son?"

No mistake was made when the old man inwardly called his grandson "son". What had he been if not a son to him! And not because the blood of Vantulyaku had passed to him, as water from the root through the branch to the leaf. Here everything was a little more complicated. The children of Konstantin Vantulyaku himself, like the children of other Nganasani, were born to drink the cup of sorrow and anguish, to leave the same joyless posterity and to die without sorrow and glory. So it had been before... But even now, in the continuation of the dying people, there remained the greatest meaning of existence, and the old man knew this. The greatest, but not the only one. For Vova Tokko was going away to learn about the unknown, and nothing could stop him. Had not Vantulyaku himself gone by such a path?.. Except that his path had turned off to the land of gloom where dwelt the spirits of his forefathers. Vantulyaku had been living by what was, Vova Tokko was striving for what was going to be. Yet who could say today what tomorrow would bring? The sky was vast, there were many stars in it, and until God's seven-eyed reindeer[1] came down from the sky, the Nganasani would not leave the tundra. Thus spoke history, eternal and immutable in its constancy and which, in the legends, was passed on to posterity from the lips of the fathers as a great and holy secret.

No one leaves without a trace. Wisdom says that the ashes hide tree stumps, and an old dwelling conceals a cherished memory. What

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[1] God's seven-eyed reindeer—the constellation of the Great Bear.— *Ed.*

would be left after Vantulyaku, who was Kasendu and Konstantin?

The *tamgá*—his brand, his family mark?..

It was carved on his rifle-butt, and there was one exactly like it on his pipe, which was nearly as old as himself... The menacingly drawn bow, the arrow on the string.

Who would release the string?

Where would the arrow fall?

From age to age, Vantulyaku's fellow countrymen had known that his *tamga* was the emblem of success and true victory in the hunt. Why, then, should Vova Tokko have doubts? Or was it Vantulyaku himself thinking that these uneasy thoughts had come to him from young Tokko? Konstantin would present him with his *tamga* and would give his grandson his success, for there was no one among the Nganasani people more worthy of such an honour. But would the released bowstring bring happiness or shame? He who stands at the foot of Komogu-Moü does not see what is behind its summit...

Vantulyaku scowled. He had been old and he had been wise; but he was now very old—whither had his mind flown?.. Oho, oho...

The old man loved Vova Tokko, but couldn't understand him, as Vantulyaku in his youth had not been able to understand his grandfather. Yet his grandfather had known the path of life and had taught Kasendu to spot its tracks among people, and in the mountains, and in the tundra. Now it was all the other way round. And all that from the *lyosa*... At first, Vantulyaku had thought them gods equal to the *koika,* whom they had subdued. But he had been to Barakhsan many times and had seen that they were the same as the Nganasani; however, there was a kind of secret something, like a *talnach* to him, or taboo; and Vantulyaku sought it everywhere and in everything, sniffed at everything, and listened. A kind of invisible force

controlled people, and he could almost feel its presence physically, but the *lyosa* laughed at the old man. Once, Vantulyaku found himself at a meeting where they were discussing a new method of building a dam. He did not understand the technical details, he was interested in something else. With the true instinct of a hunter, he felt here an approach to the solution of a problem. Alien, like a hunter in ambush unseen by his quarry, Vantulyaku watched their behaviour, each movement, each exclamation, each laugh of these strange *lyosa,* carefree as clucking capercaillies in the mating season. And everything he saw drove him to an amazing thought: the Soviet incomers were all as one!.. This was their strength. The Russians rejoiced when they were together: if one said, and the other said, and the third said, if they all said—then it was a law to them all. They could even revise what had been decided by the big *lyosa* chief... They raised their hands, and what mattered was that they were all together!.. No, Vantulyaku would not even begin to argue that the life of the Nganasani had become worse because of this. It was very much to the contrary; he would be the first to spit at anyone who said such a thing. But to him, as the wisest of the wise, it seemed that in the strength of the Soviet incomers there was one weakness and, perhaps, a disaster which he did not know how to avert. It was the danger of oblivion and contempt for the behests of their ancestors. The young, be they Russians or be they Nganasani, do not like to go in harness. But does not only one harness bind the generations together? Something unshakeable and eternal had been put in jeopardy, and it mattered little that the disaster had not yet occurred. Supposing it suddenly did—what then? Why did only the young *lyosa* arrive in the tundra? Where were the old men, their fathers and their fathers' fathers?

But the world was none the worse because of the

old man's thoughts. The new system was spreading like a sea over the tundra; even the omnipotent *koika* were powerless to stop it, and people rejoiced at this.

Would it not be more right to join the *Iyosa* Soviets as Vova Tokko wanted to do, the keen-eyed son of his son?

Vantulyaku himself, however, had already seen the electricity. In Barakhsan. Many houses, many little suns. The winter was not terrible, nor was the blizzard; you could live! And your eyes didn't hurt at all when you sat and sewed *bakari*...

Without saying what was in his mind, Konstantin Vantulyaku knew that he was going to let his grandson go... What he had been intending to say now seemed most difficult and important, and so he was raking his mind for short, simple words so that it should be easy and roomy for them in his grandson's heart.

"I give you my *tamga*," said Vantulyaku, and presented Tokko with his pipe on the bowl of which he had once carved with a curved knife a taut bow with a tightened string. "The *tamga* now belongs to you and your sons. But remember that the arrow brings good fortune... It spares the righteous and the defenceless. Do not desecrate it!"

He thought for a moment and added:

"The Nganasani people have never known shame from that arrow."

"I swear to you, grandfather, that I shall do only honourable and good deeds! But here, take my pipe!"

"Let me have it," agreed Vantulyaku, contented. "And now it is time, dawn is breaking. The boats are lonely without us already."

They put out the fire, and as they walked down to the river, Konstantin Vantulyaku nevertheless decided that at the first halt, when his grandson was making tea, he would carve the sign of

success on his pipe. After all, if Vantulyaku had not so much of life ahead of him, there was still the long and difficult hunt and the journey back to his granddaughter, Nachyupte.

II

A starry, quiet and frosty morning dawned over Barakhsan. In the North, an autumn morning seems unusually long. As if Time was stopping its course on the frontier of day and night, the darkness and the light come together while the stars are shining, and it is often at this very hour that the skies are illumined by soft, swift Northern Lights, like the reflection of distant and perhaps unearthly rays distorted in a vast expanse of water. When the Northern Lights finish playing, the stars begin to fade, and dawn comes through the twilight—the outlines of the dove-grey hills become visible on the horizon, the smooth black surfaces of the lakes, scattered like shards over the tundra, begin to shimmer, and from somewhere above the wind strikes down and scours the chill open spaces. The heavy manes of the grasses sway, smitten in one night by a sudden bitter frost, and the wind tangles their brown tresses. With a desolate scream, a seagull falls from high on one wing, and a reindeer is glimpsed from afar between the copses like the last shade of the departing night.

Nikita Basov, chief engineer for the management of the Aniva hydroelectric station project, did not sleep that night. The river-closing operation had been fixed for the following day, the twenty-third of September. After returning home late that evening, he had picked up his estimates again.

The minimum level of flow rate for the Aniva had been chosen for the beginning of the operation. The peak fall came at the time of the autumn

low waters, but Arctic rivers are as capricious as the northern weather, and by raising the flow rate by one hundred, two hundred and finally three hundred cubic metres per second, he was trying to set the limit at which the risk of tomorrow's closing of the Aniva might be justified.

If the head was too great, they would have to postpone the river-closing for a year and meanwhile drive a big discharge tunnel through the cliffs, discharge the surplus water into it and apply the standard and universally accepted method of closing the river...

That would be in a year's time, however. And if it happened, then it was hard to say for how many years the interest of the builders would be postponed, if it altogether did not subside, in this radically new dam-building idea which Basov had proposed and was following up on the Aniva.

Before returning home, Nikita Basov turned off for the Rapids once again.

The narrow beam of a car headlamp attached to the bridge girders and aimed at the river was shining on the yellow water-level gauge with its dark-blue gradations. The level had fallen noticeably in the last few hours and, looking at the divisions showing above the water, Basov guessed that the drop should reach the estimated level in twelve hours, precisely at the time scheduled for the morning.

"Even so," thought Nikita, uneasily rubbing the bridge of his nose, "what can I do about it if the level comes higher than the norm?"

How was he to get a grip, even though with only one rock, on the unevenness of the river bed so as afterwards to pile on to it concrete slabs and granite boulders to raise a barrier above the Aniva and join its banks?

He searched. Again and again he recalculated the water resistance and did not want to admit defeat.

All he could do was to raise the upper edge by mere centimetres and there was nothing with which to hold back the thrust. The most he could throw into the river would be twenty-five-ton granite boulders, but that would not be enough if the current should suddenly be stronger. There wasn't the necessary equipment available on the site for heavier fill. Nikita had the unpleasantly feverish feeling that he was not taming the Aniva, the Aniva was taming him. They had locked horns, and he would have to beat it, conquer it, if not by strength, then by cunning; but his brain, as if lassooed by one idea, could find no solution. While working, he forgot about sleep and, perhaps, if distracted for a moment, as often happens with side-vision, when you fleetingly notice something, even a dull star, Nikita Basov would have seen what he was looking for; but now his confidence that the obdurate Aniva could be bridled had become self-confidence, and by the end of the night had become stubbornness and, as they say, a hundred times he had held in his hand what he was looking for and yet he could not find it.

...A muffled, melodious sound came through the wall.

Sitting with his head in his hands, Basov raised his tired, drawn face from the desk and listened.

The clock was chiming before striking the hour. The silver runs of the little bells, like the call-sign of a distant radio-station, seemed alarming to him, or the silence was alarming, in which the air rustled stiffly, as if an invisible arrow had passed very close.

The short pause ended, and the alarming strokes fell one after another into the empty room, echoing off the walls.

It struck five...

Day had come.

Basov put out the ceiling light; he had absent-

mindedly left it on because he was used to working with a small, mushroom-shaped table-lamp which was still burning. The metal reflector was set low and at an angle so that the light fell in an uneven oval on the papers and on the window. Basov stood up, realising with regret that the night, which had seemed so short, had brought no solution and no relief. This yet again proved the correctness of his initial calculations, but there was none of the freedom in them so necessary to him for manoeuvring. He could tear his hair over this, except that Nikita did not like making a show of his emotions either when matters were successful or when he knew he was beaten. All this was in the order of things. Except that the deep furrow on the bridge of his nose would become more distinct, and from time to time he would rub it when lost in thought at such moments.

He thought he was being called from the next room. His wife? He shrugged his shoulders and looked at the closed door. Was she awake? No, all was quiet. Why would she call him? In her sleep? That wasn't a habit of Elena's. In any case, they had recently been trying to ignore one another, so that her pride would have prevented her from being the first to speak to him. Nikita unhurriedly began collecting up the sheets of paper he had been writing on during the night, threw on his jacket and went on to the balcony to see if it was going to be a fine day.

The solitary moon was at its height and had extended out dull, greenish horn. The big stars were putting it to shame with their radiance; it seemed to be sailing high up into the shining star dust far away to disappear very soon after. The acute-angled rays of the stars were still piercing the cloudless and freezing early morning air. Nikita could feel their cold touch on his face, and he thought how in childhood the stars had seemed more mysterious... Except that to remember his

childhood nowadays always made him feel sad. Wasn't it because, now that he was far, far away, he still cherished in his heart the way back home, but there could be no returning to childhood itself...

Basov, a mere thirty years of age, suppressed an involuntary sigh and smiled. No, say what you will, but that was his native Big Dipper overhead!.. His mother wrote that in the evenings, when she sat out on the porch, she often looked up at it. The sky was high, and the Dipper up there was like a bridge; your thoughts travelled over it. She would set hers free so that they would fly to her son... "And," she said, "as I get older, I've taken a fancy to hearing the 'Latest News' on the radio. I sit there like a general and they report to me about what's going on where..." This was a hint that he should not forget to tell his mother how he was faring! He wondered if she would remember him on the next day? Yes, she would, if, of course, Moscow radio announced that they had blocked the Aniva...

Without realising it, Basov was listening to the sound of the girls' voices coming from the settlement club, and the sad refrain troubled him vaguely. He couldn't hear Anna Odarchenko's voice among the singers, and yet it was her song...

Admittedly, he had no time for songs on the site, although he loved them, and at home, when in the mood, he sometimes said to his wife Elena, "Couldn't we sing something cheerful or loud and make the goose-pimples rise?" Lena would pretend not to understand the irony, and, knowing that her voice could not compare with Anna's, she would reply with seeming indifference: "Put on a record if you feel that way inclined!.." But her lips would involuntarily tighten and fine lines would form about her mouth—lines of bitterness if not of open hostility.

This amused him at first. "There's nothing you

can do about it," he would laugh, "Anna really did have a voice!.. That's why the Nganasani love her, as we loved Shulzhenko[1] once..." And so on, till the time when Elena cut him short. "Give over! I'm fed up with hearing about her! I'm fed up with everything anyway... To hell with it!.. I want to go to Moscow. I..." she curbed her sudden outburst and ended quietly, "I shall probably go away on my own..."

"You won't go anywhere," he said, smiling, although he knew that Elena meant it. "It was bad enough for me without you on the Kola Peninsula, so that's enough! You and I should go south, give our nerves a rest to stop them playing tricks on us..."

"Stop it!" interrupted Elena. She knew that he hadn't the slightest intention of going south. Why was he trying to fool her?

Nikita walked reflectively twice from one corner of the room to the other and, mastering something in himself, squashing it, perhaps exasperated that she was taking his really harmless jokes so seriously, made her a promise.

"We shan't strike that tune up again. Fair enough?"

Perhaps fair enough, and perhaps not. She didn't say, "Fair enough!" She said nothing, and he accepted it as a tacit agreement.

She had talked incessantly about Moscow almost since the very day they had arrived in Barakhsan, and this might have seemed a passing phase at first; but it did not seem so for long. Elena's stubbornness rattled him at times, especially when she assured him with condescending hauteur that in Moscow he, with his own contacts and with hers, could do more than on the Aniva. Knowing how punctilious he was in his affairs,

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[1] Klavdia Shulzhenko (1906-1984), singer and People's Artist of the USSR.— *Ed.*

she hastened to anticipate his objections. "What is there here? What makes you worse than others?" But however much she over-simplified, she could not refrain from reproaches, although, true, they were more like warnings.

"D'you really think that I've got to run after you from project to project like a dog on a lead?"

Nikita looked at her in astonishment and realised that she was waiting, or in any case was ready, to answer his sense of injury with her own, and so he grinned with restraint.

"I once told you that you'll have to joke more subtly, more diplomatically. Please take more care how you express yourself..."

"But I'm not joking. I don't know how to..."

That was when he flared up. He answered, if not boldly, at least lucidly enough, so that she had no doubts left on that score.

"I never demanded any sacrifices of you and I'm not demanding them now..."

These conversations left him with an unpleasant chill in the heart; it made itself felt every time a row flared up between them, even when it was about something of secondary importance, like that song... He began to think that the North was getting Elena down; perhaps she was temperamentally incapable of putting up with the enervating monotony of the Arctic night, or perhaps, it occurred to him, she was oppressed by him and their life together. Such a proposition seemed extremely silly to him, wild even, but Elena knew how to evade direct questions, and their relationship had gradually become so tangled that he himself didn't know what he really wanted of her. Or she of him.

Nikita was fed up with these ridiculous and endless squabbles with raised voices, all the more irritating because they sometimes erupted almost without a cause. To put an end to them, he started shouting. "Once and for all," he exclaimed,

"remember that..."—that he would never leave the Aniva until he had finished the project. She laughed at him, then suddenly began going through the suitcases, pointedly putting his shirts, ties and other things on one side and her own on the other...

"Very well, then," she said conciliatingly, "I'll stick it out until the river's been closed, but I won't stay another day."

"That's good," he sighed. "You've got more than enough time to think it over."

"That just what I was going to say to you."

He hoped that Elena was being capricious and that this whim would pass off; but it somehow happened that they had not exchanged two civil words since then. They talked to one another, of course, but drily, as at official receptions, not admitting that the former feeling had died, had burned itself out. Or perhaps they were wrong to keep quiet. Perhaps they should indeed speak up at once and say that it hadn't worked out... The North and the Aniva had nothing to do with it. Nor was there any need for her to be jealous of Anna. It could be silly and degrading for Elena. As, incidentally, the fact that Elena always wanted to be Number One, the best of them all. She wanted to shine, and she didn't always succeed...

The singing was still coming from the club. From one voice, Nikita recognised his secretary, Lyuba Evdokimova. A cheerful, mischievous girl, she had come to the project from the country and had somehow hit it off with everybody straightaway. She was seventeen or eighteen, but she attached herself to her seniors and looked more adult than she really was. She was now enunciating the words painstakingly, well and with sincerity, but there was something in her voice that was not her own, was not from the heart—no pain or suffering... Nikita could only hear in her voice the desire to experience, a frank imitation of someone

else's feeling (like an echo of Anna's pain):

Aniva, Aniva, your banks are so steep,
I weep in my song, in your flowing you weep...

Lyuba's friends took up the refrain, and it was like a wave rising and crashing against a shore and rolling back, and its traces were lost in the sand,

My friend does not know it, he knows not, my friend,
How bitter my tears are upon the white sand...

and, perhaps not falsifying this time, lived by the song:

He knows not, he knows not, my dear, faithful friend,
That my tears have been falling upon the white sand...

and what she had left unsaid was finished by the chorus, sensitive to the sufferings of a young girl:

Aniva, Aniva, I weep for the day
When you carried my song and my joy far away...

The last notes died away, and Nikita could clearly hear the noise of the waterfall in the distance. Again he imagined something inexpressibly disturbing, although nothing had changed round him; except that in the club where the girls were singing, a window-pane rattled—someone had abruptly slammed the vent shut. That night many could not sleep in Barakhsan. While it was still early, thought Nikita, he must go down to the Aniva. There would be the noise of many people there in the daytime, it wouldn't be possible to

hear the Rapids over the roar of bulldozers, and then—the Aniva would never be the same again, as it had been yesterday or a year ago... And there was the feeling that, with the Aniva, everything in his life must change. He knew that this feeling was deceptive, but he found it agreeable and he did not want to hurry, although the cold was already cutting through him.

He could see the lights coming on in the houses opposite. One window, at which he kept glancing from time to time—it was Anna's—was dark; the panes shone with a blue gleam. Looking harder, Nikita finally saw that the curtains in the flat were not drawn, which meant that she was not at home... As if that was all he needed to know, Nikita (the chief of operations again!) keenly surveyed the sky in which the carefree and indifferent moon was slowly dissolving and fading away.

The hills on the horizon were an almost indistinguishable black. Perhaps he couldn't really see them at all. He simply knew that they were usually visible from where he stood, but now there was just a thick, continuous band there—it was either the ground or the starless rim of the sky that seemed so dark. In the morning, a mist could come down from there, a damp, chill wind could rise, and the low grey cloud, also from the North, could blot out the sun, so much desired and so brief in September...

He did not want that. It was a red-letter day for the Barakhsan people, so why couldn't nature be kind to them for once?

A car snarled somewhere not far away and came to a stop.

"Gatilin?" thought Basov, meaning the head of the project management. "He's been to the river or the concrete works, or most likely he's been checking that they've moved the excavator over to the left bank..."

He wasn't worried about it himself; the excavator would be there by six o'clock. Only an exceptional circumstance, such as an accident, could prevent it, and in that case he would have known about it long ago...

Basov did not doubt that Gatilin would now ring him up and announce with ill-concealed irony that he had not had any sleep, his mind had been on the job, and he had gone down there, had talked with so-and-so, hurried so-and-so up and twisted so-and-so's tail. However, he would say towards the end, there was no cause for alarm, and in general he, Basov, could rely on Gatilin's assurance: everything would be fine and dandy... But behind all the details, obligingness, and pointlessly emphasised deference would be Gatilin's wounded vanity.

Unexpectedly for many who knew Gatilin when Basov was appointed chief of the river-closing operation, Gatilin had at once lost some of the generosity and good nature for which he was famous. Nikita should have immediately have had a talk with him to sort things out, but while he was still coming round to the idea, time had already run out, their relations had already taken a different turn, something had appeared in each of them that did not allow frankness—at this stage, anyway—and now the river-closing operation was already on top of them. Not so much with ruthlessness, as with the equanimity typical of success-intoxicated youth, Nikita decided, "Never mind, he'll get over it, he'll weather it somehow..." And Basov's equanimity no doubt riled Gatilin, as, incidentally, Gatilin's irritability riled him.

Nikita went back to his room and there was a long ring—Gatilin. Without taking off the receiver and without waiting for the buzzer to stop sounding, Nikita tugged the lead out of the socket so that the telephone wouldn't disturb Elena in the

morning—she was always asking for this—and he would see Gatilin soon anyway!.. If it were something serious, he would have rung from the site.

The Basovs occupied a two-room flat in a house built of silicate brick. In the "White House", as the Barakhsan people jokingly called it; but such houses were for the time being considered the best in Barakhsan, the first builders lived in them and Nikita had obtained a flat there by the same right. He had come to the Aniva as one of those nineteen members of the advance party who had set up the first beam on the Rapids; they had driven a memorial post into the granite on the site of the future hydroelectric station... In the big room that he and Elena used as a living-room and a bedroom, the lamp was burning as usual on the little table at the head of the broad ottoman. Elena liked sleeping with a light on, and Nikita, indifferent to her whims, was accustomed to it.

As he walked past his sleeping wife, he looked at her and stopped, astonished by an unexpected serenity on her face in sleep and by her attitude.

Elena was lying uncovered, supine, her head bent down slightly, from the pillow towards the edge of the ottoman and her black, unloosed hair hanging down almost to the floor. The electric lamp was covered with a high green lampshade and so its light, also greenish, fell on her face, giving the luxuriant hair a tinge of green, the way black weeds sometimes shine under the sun in green water, swaying imperceptibly in the gentle current. Nikita sensed the weight of the tranquilly flowing tresses and had an irresistible impulse to lift them up and lay them on Elena's breast... As if by contrast with her hair, her face was flooded with an unnatural pallor, the shadows under her eyes were trembling imperceptibly, as if she was only pretending to be asleep and was watching him through her long, lowered eyelashes.

Oblivious somewhere between sleep and dream, doubtless after waiting up for him all night, Elena was beautiful at that moment. As he looked at her, Nikita thought perhaps for the first time that he had underestimated her beauty. It was as if he had never noticed it before, although he knew that she was beautiful and yet indeed he had never spoken about it. He had become used to it... Incidentally, even now it was only a passing thought. However, he ran his eyes over the supple lines of her light body and bare arm, stretched above with kind of deliberate picturesqueness that even irritated him. Why hadn't she changed the light? After all, the bodily warmth was concealed by the greenish light of the lamp—cold, like her character... Couldn't she really understand that you can't get away from yourself?.. Nikita transferred his gaze from her shoulder to her breasts, noting the elegant protuberances of the dark nipples under the diaphanous pale blue of the night-dress. The fluid, clinging fabric, shimmering with diffused light, hugged the broad hips, hiding the deep shadows under a fine web. The graceful legs with the slender ankles were lying on one another and stretched out like those of a *vazhenka,* a wild female northern reindeer, resting after a hard run, and the light was trembling on the smooth skin of the knee-dimple.

Nikita was well aware that he was seeing Elena like this for the first time, and he even thought that she usually slept curled up into a ball, with only her ears outside the blanket; however, the feeling that this was already long familiar to him, somewhere once seen by him—this feeling hit him unpleasantly so that he even wanted to persuade himself of it... He went closer, bent down, lifted up the flowing dark hair on his palm and had already poised his hand to let it fall on to her breast, when he noticed a vein throbbing in Elena's temple and realised that she could wake

up at the slightest touch...

Nikita took his hand away.

The sooty tresses as before hung down almost to the floor and swayed lightly—black weeds in the green of an ocean wave...

Basov knew from the engine noise that the head of the construction project's car had driven up to the house next door and he was not wrong in assuming that Gatilin had come back from the site.

Big-boned, expansive by nature and fussy, Gatilin was not in the habit of relaxing until he had personally checked everything to the last detail. This was expressed partly in a habit acquired over the years, the principle of trusting, but not being too carried away by trust—and he was even more zealous so that everyone could see him busy on the site nights on end—alone, without his chief engineer or chief of operations. He was spurred and goaded by wounded vanity, but Gatilin had his own long-term aim in view: the river-closing operation would be over, but there would be lots more work to be done, and then he would ask and demand of each that they should put as much into it as he was putting in now...

The night transfer of the heavy machinery had proceeded normally. Gatilin was satisfied. He had somehow forgotten that at the general meeting, during discussions of the initial positions for the excavators on the day of the operation, he had sat in silence, having himself already decided which machine should be put where and, knitting his brows craftily, had waited to see how Gavrila Silin and Korostylev would distribute the machinery, Nikita having instructed them make their suggestions. Basov, evidently guessing why Gatilin was so glum, asked when Korostylev had finished his report:

"Well, Viktor Sergeyevich, d'you agree? Shall we confirm it?"

Gatilin, who had no objections, suggested:

"Could we move them out a bit earlier, maybe—by a day or two? Especially the excavators..."

"It's not worth it," objected Korostylev. "The men'll get bored with the extra waiting time."

"It's up to you..." drawled Gatilin, backing out of the dispute. In the final analysis, it was Korostylev and Silin who were to arrange the transfer of the machinery.

When it came to ferrying the vehicles across, however, he completely forgot that he had promised not to interfere in any way, and, like the Civil War hero Chapayev going into battle, charged off to hitch up hawsers, signal to the tractors, and swear when someone interfered or was clumsy. He got covered in mud, but regained his calm. If he had been with someone closer to him at that moment, he would not have held out; he would have told how at first he had decided only to take a look, just in case Silin's men were overcomplicating things. He'd come up and immediately got involved. And to be perfectly honest, he felt like shouting his head off; after all, it was the decisive night before the battle... He got into a better mood, was warmer to people, he knew that they too were not offened at him for shouting, were putting it down to temperament, and he himself would forgive them any sin now.

In a cheerful, uplifted mood, moderately firm and goodnatured, as was noticeable from the not very successful jokes which he scattered to right and left of him, he showed up at the river site; but here again something came over him; he could not keep himself in hand.

While checking readiness for the river-closing operation, he gave instructions for the left platform to be lit up; this was the area on the bank from which rocks would be dumped to meet those being thrown in from the opposite bank. Powerful

shafts of light from the searchlights mounted on the cliffs shot across to the other bank, piercing the nocturnal darkness with a crackle. The bluish white, almost violet light flooded a rocky projection that looked like a horse-shoe near the neck of the waterfall. The road on the ledge, flattened by trial runs and grey with gravel, looped round the platform along the sharp edge of the bank. From the height of the right bank, it was hard to believe that lorries could hold their ground once with their bodies tipped... When they had rehearsed the operation in the daytime, everything had seemed normal; but now the frightening proximity of the black, steamy-swirling river was giving rise to unpleasant afterthoughts. The current was sluggish and heavy, like a flow of steaming blood, and the more Gatilin stared at the river, the more violently did it trouble his tired imagination. He could not say exactly why that weird and wondrous play of light and shade fascinated him so much—perhaps it all depended on his mood, but at that moment Gatilin suddenly felt with his whole being that the Aniva was not just the Aniva and that the Rapids would give them a lot of trouble...

Almost unconsciously, he wanted to jump several days ahead of this last peaceful night. He was not a coward, but he could not wait for a successful outcome...

"What a beauty!" shouted one of the lads beside him, then turned to Gatilin. "Viktor Sergeyevich, let 'em shine, eh? There'll never be another day like it!"

"Oh, all right! We can be extravagant for just one night, after all it's a festival. And it's the festival of the river-closing operation, boys..."

Watching Gatilin in silence, Chief Mechanic Silin eloquently spat out a long-extinct fag-end and turned to Korostylev, the duty controller.

"That's enough of the show, Vasya. We haven't made it to the festival yet. We mustn't disturb

people for nothing... Anyway, Basov gave orders for the lights not to be lit. Why, we'll have the whole settlement up with this sort of lark... What's the point?"

"Oh, come on, Gavrila Panteleimonovich!" pleaded the boys.

"Wrap up! Or else!.." he barked.

Silin's husky, chesty baritone got on Gatilin's nerves. He flushed and took a deep breath, aware that he had blundered. A trifle, of course, but Silin shouldn't be giving lectures all the same... It was still not too late to recoup with a joke, but Gatilin said nothing. He wanted the controller to query the order, observing at least some semblance of subordination; but Korostylev, the old dray-horse, scowled and went into the wagon to phone the electricians.

A little later, the searchlights dimmed and slowly went out, as if being put to death.

No one said anything any more.

In the dark, the waterfall gurgled and foamed as always. Pneumatic drills were still chattering away somewhere; the car was ticking over close by. Gatilin got into it and slammed the door.

The car drove off.

Now what?.. He shouldn't, in front of the others, have got into an argument over his own and Basov's authority. Authority was in general such fragile stuff that you couldn't discuss it with yourself in any weather. It was useless getting involved with Gavrila Silin. They had clashed just before the damming of the river. Over a triviality, it might be said—the rollers. Gatilin had asked for the asphalt on the area in front of the offices to be rolled as soon as possible, but the other had dug his heels in and hadn't sent the rollers until the road to the dam-site had been levelled off... All right, they could have had a row and no hard feelings afterwards; but Silin had taken umbrage. And he was such a shouter that he could drown a

trumpet. And mistrustful, like all old men, although he had golden hands. "Oh, to hell with him," decided Gatilin with a sigh. "Leave the old gaffer in peace, he hasn't long to go before he's on pension... But why was Korostylev dancing to his tune?.."

Korostylev was certainly no dray-horse—Gatilin had blurted it out in the heat of the moment, and even then it had stuck in his throat. He was unsophisticated, not quick to take offence and he had his head screwed on; but Gatilin would never teach him not to defer to Basov...

Gatilin had long had his eye on Korostylev and had begun accustoming him to the idea that he was to be Gatilin's deputy. It was an important job and, above all, an honour; it must be justified, and so he felt that Korostylev should understand him at a half-word or a half-glance. But the other didn't always understand, the eccentric, and in such cases Gatilin weighed things up agonisingly: should he give the order for Korostylev's appointment or should he not rush things? The prerogative, undoubtedly, was Gatilin's. Basov would say nothing; in any case, he would not begin to object. But it was not easy to reverse a man's promotion. To do so would be to make a fool of himself.

Korostylev was no fool, although he was straightforward, like Basov; but Gatilin was hoping that they would work well together. He knew that Korostylev had come to the Aniva project at the same time as Basov, and remembered perfectly well that working with the advance party had brought them closer together and made them friends. Both had matured as engineers since then and perhaps, therefore, he wanted to separate them—one on one side of him, the other on the other. In this way, Gatilin would balance himself against Basov. After Korostylev, the remainder could be sifted out—some with Basov, some with him...

At heated moments, it sometimes seemed to Gatilin that Korostylev was immoderately quiet—either timid or naive. Most likely he had been that way because he was young, and so Gatilin regarded a certain awkwardness of character with indulgence, forgiving him much because of his own generosity and Korostylev's warm-heartedness. Kindness, Gatilin believed, never hurt anybody; but it must be used with intelligence.

After he had driven away from the riverside platform along the road to the settlement, Gatilin's driver intended to go at full speed, since the asphalt had been rolled as smooth as glass and there was nothing and nobody coming the other way; but Gatilin was irritated not so much by the fast driving as by the current of air in his face that was flapping the canvas roof of the car, and was stung even more by the sudden and elementary thought that speed is the overcoming of resistance.

"Take it easy!.." he barked angrily.

"At a walking pace, Viktor Sergeyevich?" asked the young Jehu, but he accelerated just the same, showing that he had a mind of his own. A scowl from head of the project, however, made him reduce speed.

"Just as well for you that you're reliable," thought Gatilin without malice. He disliked being contradicted, but here, in Barakhsan, it was the general fashion: whatever you said, they twisted it round to suit themselves. Independence bordering on the fantastic! But give them leeway, and they'd come to you in tears, not knowing what to do. True, that didn't go for Basov...

When Gatilin had been transferred to Barakhsan from Karadag, the minister had warned him, "You'll be satisfied with Basov, Viktor Sergeyevich." It was true; the man's initiative went beyond all bounds; just try and hold him back. It was as if Nikita didn't like Gatilin's style,

but wouldn't say so openly. Was he hoping, perhaps, to bend Gatilin to his own will? Let him try! Let him first taste the porridge of which he, Gatilin, had swallowed more than a basinful at Karadag.

Yes, Karadag!

It wasn't that Gatilin had given the project there nearly seven years of his life. What mattered was that he had found himself. He had become Gatilin there, a man who had to be reckoned with. Karadag wasn't the tundra or the Arctic, but it was two and a half thousand metres above sea-level and it meant crossing three passes by mountain road to the main base. Karadag was mountains and more mountains, and in them a valley divided by a turbulent river on which they had built a dam. They had laid a water pipeline through the rocks to the waterless desert lying below, and further, across the desert, they had dug a sixty-nine-kilometre canal. The management of the supporting enterprises alone at the project required a staff of three and a half thousand, and there had not been enough people... He had been faced with a choice: be deputy head of a trust, or be on his own, only in the kind of job for which no one ever volunteered. They had given him a friendly warning about this and had cautioned him, but he had taken on the management job, he had managed to liven things up. The Karadag project needed concrete, girders, slabs, electricity, and telephone lines, roads and transport. Because of the manpower shortage the planned targets were being missed, even on the key sites.

Lack of personnel was the bane of many remote construction projects and, as Gatilin remembered, managements had been complaining about it ever since the early post-war years. At one time, high wages had been the carrot at the building-sites, but the picture had begun to change in the 1950s: wages were all very well, but people wanted a

normal life and normal working conditions. They needed houses with modern conveniences, schools, cafeterias, shops, cinemas, laundries and hairdressers. All it needed to solve the problem was to build enough of these facilities, but how could you build when there weren't the means or the manpower?

The Karadag Mountains were beautiful when it was calm, but in bad weather it was as if a wild beast had come roaring to life. Karadag had to be tamed, but there was nothing with which to do it. Gatilin was at a loss. He realised that to pull the management out of the hole would not be purely a matter of personal prestige; it was not a luxury, it was a necessity, which meant there must be an answer, but finding it proved no easy matter. His wife Varya had once commented that all the projects he had supervised in the Far East, Siberia and the Urals had been so commonplace that it had not been worth leaving Moscow for them. Maybe. Builders don't pluck stars down from the sky. And not everyone is entrusted with unique projects. The majority (Gatilin counted himself as one of them) progressed through ruins and barrack-huts to prefabricated boxes and then built cities. The top projects of which Varya dreamed had long ceased to excite his imagination. It's when you're young that your powers are unlimited, and when you cross the critical line at forty, you realise that it's too late, it's no use hoping for good luck and success. After forty, all there is left for you to do is work.

From the height of those two and a half thousand metres to which Karadag soared, Gatilin looked at himself in a different way. Nothing passes so unnoticed and nothing leaves such ineradicable traces in a person as time. He had missed his chance to draw conclusions, to check, as the navigators say, his plotted course against the real one and to make corrections. After all,

why do people's lives turn out differently? Why is one happy and another not? Is it not because the meaning is determined by the degree of reality in the target you have set yourself? It rarely happens that the way to it is short and direct; it takes years, not days, and you have to make detours and retrace your steps and, perhaps, lose your way. Perhaps you're not going anywhere, just marking time, or, even worse, you are being swept along by the current like a chip of wood. Is not this the source of that burdensome feeling of helplessness about the future and the idea that things can't be worse than they are already? The reason is not that he is, when all is said and done, the ranker Gatilin rather than Andrei Bochkin or Semyon Kalizhnyuk.[1] It is easy to deceive yourself, envy them and attribute their successes to the powers vested in them by their positions. Only conviction of rightness and a sense of duty give a man the real powers. Gatilin had known compromises of conscience and failures in his work, but each time he hoped to get his own out of life. It had been easy enough for him to believe this as a young man; but who now would swear that the management of Karadag was not the peak of his capacities?

These disturbing reflections sometimes seemed petty and unworthy of attention; he feared them as if they could make him negligible, petty and insignificant too, which he had no right to be. He had been through the war, had survived, had celebrated victory, and this already justified his existence. Once, in Karadag, he had happened upon a book of war memoirs which said that of each ten men who went to the war in 1941, only one came back alive. It was as if someone had looked at Gatilin from those far-off times with the eyes of the fallen, of soldiers who had died for

[1] Famous builders of hydroelectric projects.— *Ed.*

him; and the peaceful, sunny day in the Karadag valley began to fade when he remembered those men and began filling with the din of battle, the persistent, nerve-racking scream of aircraft pulling out of a dive, the shrapnel crackle of shells, the endless stuttering of machine-guns spraying the river crossing... It was as if cotton wadding had suddenly been pulled out of his ears. Gatilin distinctly heard a shell burst on the crossing. Wooden beams reared up, the crunch of pillars smashed by the explosion was like the crunch of human bodies, and Gatilin, the company commander, had thought with horror at the time that again he must send his men into that hell of fire, water and iron, and go there himself so as to ensure the crossing...

Even after the war, he could not count how many of his men had been laid low on the long journey from west to east and from east to west, how many lives had been given to reach that peaceful shore... After several hours of battle, when the fire of the German batteries had stopped but the white dots of tracer bullets were still coming over occasionally from goodness knows where, Gatilin assembled his company, of which only two soldiers had survived, miraculously unscathed, and a lieutenant with a bandaged arm. They leaned their backs against a pontoon shot full of holes, dreaming only of one thing—a cigarette. The lieutenant, a cheerful lad from the Ukraine named Gorkovenko, with a glum solemnity and reproach addressed to no one in particular, said, "And it is given unto thee to sing of rivers flowing backwards, and of bridges built over them..." He was silent for a moment, then ironically remarked, "Pliny the Younger... What would he say of our times?" The soldiers looked significantly at him and then at Gatilin. Shell-shock... Somehow, with hands that were badly scratched, Gatilin unstoppered a flask of spirit.

Without saying a word, they drank it up, merely taking off their helmets—they were not wearing forage caps under them. Gorkovenko found a dog-end. Heavy, reeking smoke mixed with fog was spreading over the river. You wondered what Pliny had to do with it when 1944 was happening right under your nose and you didn't believe the war would ever be over. That company was gone. It would never exist again...

"Don't split us up, Captain," one of the men asked Gatilin.

"I won't," he promised. A damp wind was fanning his back from the river, and, mentally cursing Gorkovenko for Pliny, Gatilin thought how lovely and beautiful and good life would have to be after the war. Here they were, four of them, and they had to take on everything left to the world by those who had fallen between this bank and the one opposite. He banished from his mind the thought that this was impossible, otherwise people would not even know grief. It was impossible to measure what they must do on earth and how much, but Gatilin felt that to the end of his days there could only be one yardstick left for everything—life itself.

At Karadag, reliving that day in August 1944, Gatilin felt that he now understood why success and recognition had passed him by. It was impossible to plough, or build, or live by halves. To prevail over the impossible—that was what he had painstakingly avoided and that was what he must set his mind on now or never.

His wife was wasting her time when she reproached him about Karadag. He did not like boasting, but in less than a year the innovations in Gatilin's management were the talk of the whole valley; by the next year, his fame had spread beyond the pass and people began to stream towards him, not away from him. Managements from the nearby building projects called on

Gatilin, not just to have a look at what he had been up to there, but to threaten him, shake their fists and bang them on the table to stop him luring away the best personnel. He either agreed with them or laughed. "Don't you like it? The workers demand? They're leaving?" Flaring up, he would slash the air with his fist. "They're doing the right thing! Otherwise nothing'll ever get you lot going..."

Gatilin had been asked many times, both out of idle curiosity and in earnest: "Viktor Sergeyevich, how did you begin?.." "From the beginning!" he would say with a smile, and he would quote his chief accountant, who used to say, "From a kopek!..." The rumour was abroad that with Gatilin, even the air didn't get wasted, and he readily agreed. Indeed, the used steam went to the greenhouses, spare tractors ploughed the virgin soil; on the beautiful high mountain pastures of Karadag, the shepherds pastured sheep that had been partly obtained from the state farms in exchange for reject building materials and partly bought with funds from the proceeds of the *subbotniks*[1]. He fed seven hundred pigs with swill from the canteen; he also had a poultry farm with several thousand birds; there were green vines on the slopes, a young orchard—and all this enormous farm, working on an internal profit-making basis, brought in millions of profit. You could build something with that sort of money...

No one was surprised, not even Gatilin himself, when inspectors began visiting him. His colleagues forecast a well-deserved promotion. Gatilin proudly laughed it off—as always when he acknowledged the truth behind the joke. However, the captious questions of the inspectors kept hitting him under the belt and put him on his guard. It

[1] A form of unpaid voluntary work for the benefit of society.— *Ed.*

was as if they didn't believe him in some way, and he had already lost the habit of a self-doubling attitude. The first, a district executive commission, was followed by one from People's Control, then one from the District Committee, then one from the Region. It got as far as the ministry of the Republic and, finally, Union ministry. One intelligent man, his accountant, said: "Inspectors don't act off their own bat, someone lays them on, same as at a signal..." Gatilin had not believed him: had there been a "signal", official conclusions would have resulted long ago... And his carping was legitimate! Didn't they know him, then?

"Viktor Sergeyevich," they said to him, "you have here a serious violation of the staff rolls. It is not laid down that fitters, mechanics, and drivers should be on the same list as shepherds, poultry farmers, agronomists and stock-farmers..." "In my cafeteria," Gatilin would say, "a three-course dinner costs thirty kopeks, supper costs ten, no charge for salad, and we collect two boxes of gherkins and tomatoes in the greenhouses every day." They told him that the agricultural equipment had been paid for out of project funds, and he replied that there project was special, especially one so far away. Supplies were not up to the mark and he did not intend to wait and observe the staff register on an empty stomach... "That is all very well," they said, "but this is irregular, financial discipline comes above everything else, we have no right to close our eyes to it". He took the inspectors to the hostel—two-bed apartments, polished furniture, study rooms; and he led them over a corridor carpet, put down not for the benefit of the inspectors, but for drivers and fitters, and he mentioned, by the way, that he had fought for that carpet for a year at the republican ministry, but had convinced them in the end and had got it out of them. "I shall convince you too!" he said.

It had all been built by his own efforts and with investments which did not go into any comparison with the funds that are normally spent on the procurement of the required materials.

"What are you working as," they asked him, "a purveyor or the head of a management?"

He had to admit, unfortunately, that it was more as a purveyor...

It was not he, however, but his assistants who told the inspectors how "our Viktor Sergeyevich" had done this, that, and the other, and this was not to do with salad and fruit, but lorries, dump-trucks, factories... And it was ascertained, finally, that the eccentric Gatilin had refused a private house offered to him by the project management, that he himself worked with spade or axe on Sundays, that no one had ever seen Gatilin take home a bunch of onions or radishes, to say nothing of gherkins... "And in general..." explained the project's Party organiser, "he has a mountain behind him! He has nothing to fear." But that wasn't even the point; the point was that in the last few years, Gatilin's project had not had any staff migration problems, and that all who saw how other people lived and worked on Gatilin's project, wanted to live and work with him themselves. There were not only houses for the workers, there was respect; moreover, there was a community centre, an amateur theatre, a children's music school, a swimming-pool, a preventive medicine clinic and boat station at the rest-centre in the mountains... As for production figures, Gatilin, after swallowing a few tablets of tried and tested Validol this time, showed the inspectors a congratulatory telegram from the minister in which it was noted that he and his management had achieved the highest production per man under the ministry...

Each group of inspectors worked out its own findings and left, and Gatilin (this was no secret to

him) would rack his brains trying to work out who was so systematically and pitilessly harrassing him with clever anonymous letters, making him out to be a profiteer and throwing mud at him... A sudden summons to Moscow, evidently on the same matter, finally broke him.

He felt ill. He asked the secretary to return his airline ticket and boarded a train instead, hoping that the three-day journey would bring him back to normal. He said a cold good-bye to those who saw him off, inwardly mistrustful of their approving, cheerful smiles. Gatilin was rattled by a phrase dropped at the station by one of his people and not intended for his ears. He valued his position at Karadag, but he did not think it had been so noticeable. What the person said was: "...You won't break him, he's tying tight knots out of power". It was true, but not entirely so, and he felt like shouting, "That's all rubbish. Power itself can bend anyone into a ram's horn!"

Soon after the train moved off, Gatilin isolated himself in the compartment, knowing that he would not be bothered until Moscow.

According to the old tradition, they had presented him for the journey with a small cask of raisin *arak,* a strong drink, and Gatilin, absently trying the acrid liquor, had a sinking sensation in the pit of the stomach. Confident that the stuff would not affect him, he downed several glasses and began singing in his dismal solitude like a Tatar in the steppe, upsetting the sleepy carriage with his weired, peasant-like howling.

Guilty, he came to next day when the train was rolling through the green Ukraine with its Lombardy poplars. Sometimes a quiet, garrulous river glimmered outside the window; in the orchards beyond stood two or three mud-plastered huts; a little boy was driving a flock of geese down the hill with a stick, and this transient peace reminded Gatilin of something long forgotten. He imagined

that the train was carrying him with despatch-rider speed not over distance, but through time, and if he got out at every station or halt, he would find himself each time in one of those half-forgotten days of his life which would never return to reality again. That was an urban-type settlement sailing past with a brown wooden water-tower and a solitary tanker on the spare rails and with squat two-storey brick houses by the road. Not noticing the horned TV aerials, Gatilin looked at the luxuriant front gardens with their tall velvety-pink mallows. There was a brief glimpse of a red flag, probably on a mast over a school. Gatilin noted in his memory that this was 1940 that he had just passed, Podolsk; and people of the little towns seemed familiar to him and looked after him with good-natured, hospitable faces. The war somehow seemed to have missed these parts... Seemed, because the white obelisks with the five-pointed stars looked sadly into the train windows almost every kilometre. The horizon beyond the stars was spacious, over them flew flood plains, fields over which the wind drove waves of young wheat and, level as the roads, strips of forest ran away back to the horizon and also reminded him of the distant past... The train slowed down in front of a signal ahead, the wheels began to clatter more smoothly, and a big, colourful city glided up to meet him. The gates of the railway depots were wide open, waves of heat came wafting out of them; the chimneys of the power station were smoking heavily; in a dusty garage yard, a driver, standing on the footstep and looking over his shoulder, was turning a Kolkhida truck round in reverse; a tram, as orange as an overripe sunflower, gracefully cut a corner on a half-turn; and there were white prefabricated houses everywhere with their green and red loggias and there were tower cranes on circular feet... There wasn't a town without building work in progress! The scale

was staggering—but there would be a shortage of concrete somewhere, or of slabs, or of boards, and you could be sure that builders were needed everywhere. All he had to do was get off the train, say who he was, where from and what he could do, and they'd give him a roof over his head and a job. "Just work, dear friend, don't spare yourself."

Was he really afraid of Moscow?

He was probably more afraid of Karadag.

Everything was going well there for the time being! But he had already thought many times that his sapper's instinct was not deceiving him and the ground wasn't really solid underfoot... He had, as it were, caught the ferment of the times when he had availed himself of the internal profit-making system; people had perked up, but he had not expected that five and then ten hard-working years would pass and a time of different relations with people would come for him. Without quibbling over minor details, he had given them everything they needed, he had bound them together with a common concern; like a cooper, had fitted and adjusted the staves to each other to make the barrel, and so he had for each one his place. His main pride was not the houses with the balconies or the hostels with the carpets or even the supplementary farm, but the collective, obeying him as the body obeys the brain. "Viktor Sergeyevich said..."—and that was that: there was no need to ask, order, convince—they just did it! But when he had satisfied them, when all they had to do was work, suddenly, on one sector and then on another, an elemental initiative began to show. The chief of road transport couldn't work with him, the chief mine surveyer left, and he, Gatilin, was blamed for it... People began making their own decisions, not detrimental to the job, but over his head, and since neither they nor anyone else in the management thought there was any-

thing strange about this, Gatilin bore with it, painstakingly concealing his wounded pride. For the time being, they forgave his rudeness, his intensity, his shouting because of his "old achievements"; but it was time for him to change somehow, which meant giving way to them, and that was something he couldn't do. If they offered him another job with other people, that, he knew from experience, would be easier. While you're setting into the job, what with one thing and another, you adapt, and they get used to you.

He was in luck! He was appointed to Barakhsan and flew there, rubbing his hands with delight. Enthusiasts, the Young Communists, they work like fury and they are the ones with whom you could move mountains! No matter that they were still green; he had the Karadag experience behind him. "Gatilin," he would say, "is like this: he'll lay everything on, he'll give you everything you need, only don't let him down with your work reports, lads!"

So how were the youngsters? They were embarrassed, they were content, they weren't against him, but...

Look, Viktor Sergeyevich, they've been building houses here without you and no worse than at Karadag. Rational street-planning... That's the community centre foundations there, that's the café, and the sports centre will be in those woods. And our food's no worse than on the south coast of the Crimea when the fruit's ripe on the trees.

Had Gatilin's former initiative really been surpassed here already, and without any special effort? Did his exertions in Karadag boil down solely to enforced changes which were being dictated by the times everywhere, and was his personal merit solely in that he had taken his bearings correctly from reality? It was not enough for Barakhsan, and Gatilin was dismayed. Where was he to begin?

Then, of their own accord, Nikita Basov and Alimushkin, the Party Organiser, came to him uninvited.

"Racking your brains, Viktor Sergeyevich?" they said, laughing.

He was stern and business-like.

"Something urgent for me? Sit down and we'll discuss it."

"Sorry to disillusion you," Alimushkin glanced sideways at Basov and concealed a smile. "The big problems don't come into it. We only have trivialities... We're on schedule with the basic projects, but we've got hang-ups with the kindergarten, the crèche, the restaurant, and the school. They promised to have the school and the crèche going by September, but the roofs aren't up yet, and they're behind with the painting and decorating... Will you take them on?"

"We'll get them going!" he said, ending the sentence with an exclamation mark.

And now it was night. Gatilin was at home, leafing through some magazines. A stack of books on the bedside table. He had to bring his ideas up to date! The kids were pure gold, but he mustn't put a foot wrong with them, especially Basov. Modest fellow, one in a million, a brain trust, every word could be tested electronically. You wouldn't fool him with the old ways. "He must be made to realise that we're not all homespun," thought Gatilin to himself.

It was embarrassing for him, as an "oldster", to bow to the young, and he was studying the half-forgotten sciences independently; he wanted to surpass this upstart and give him a surprise, rightly assuming that in spite of his being a Candidate, Basov hadn't been through the mill. At the drop of a hat, Basov would come out with words like SOL[1] and STR[2] as if spitting seeds out

[1] Scientific Organisation of Labour.—*Ed.*

[2] Scientific and Technological Revolution.—*Ed.*

with his tongue; all his hopes were on them; but he, Gatilin, had learned the hard way by experience, and he knew that sooner or later he would have the chance to show his strength. At that time, true, the papers were crammed with articles about the Scientific Organisation of Labour, and Gatilin glanced at them, mulled over them and weighed them up. There was much advice on how to utilise production resources, but where were you to get those resources? How were you to get the urgently needed equipment? Not a word!

Gatilin waited for a suitable moment and pushed in the needle.

"Well, Comrade Science, so are we going to do it?" he asked Nikita Basov, laughing. "We haven't got any cross-country vehicles. We won't lay any facilities by winter without them. Are you and I going to freeze the settlements, and the sites, or what?.."

In summer, a cross-country vehicle in the tundra is hands and feet. You won't get far humping the pipes on your back—you need equipment. And the delivery of trucks on order had been promised in a year's time, no earlier. Even though the suppliers were tricky: one was in Moscow, the other in Krasnoyarsk, and still there was no progress.

"Why didn't you anticipate such a situation?"

"Who knew the deliveries were going to be fouled up?" said Basov.

Gatilin swore, and said almost casually that impossible situations don't happen on construction sites and let "Comrade Science" go away to think. Gatilin himself radioed the local organisations. He promised the earth, and in one place they took the bait. Clearly, he wouldn't get away without extra costs. With a clear conscience, he signed a blank check in payment, confident that whatever the local organisation threw in with the cross-country vehicles, it would all come in handy on the site,

and if not, it could be resold. He sent off a messenger urgently with instructions: "The main thing is the equipment—never mind the rest..." The man didn't even check and brought, with two cross-country vehicles, half a million greatcoat belts. Half a million! With holes in them... Where could they go? Who would take them? Gatilin bellowed with rage and tore his hair, but they still had to be accounted for somehow. He had never been swindled like that before. He would have been happy to send them all back with the two vehicles, but it couldn't be done. They'd certainly caught an old sparrow out on chaff.

But the truth will out. In Barakhsan, they were all his own kind, they kept quiet, but outside the Arctic circle, to the south, even if you didn't show yourself, the whole of Siberia was guffawing. "He's got himself a decoration out of you, that bright spark..." they said, laughing at Gatilin. However, Gatilin was all right, he weathered the storm and kept a firm grip on himself. He laid communications none the less and, with heating in the houses, thought it over and realised that those belts were going to be counted against him... He furtively burned them a few at a time and wrote them off, clenching his teeth swearing not to teach the brain trust any more lessons to show that practical experience can make mincemeat of theory and the law. Yes, it could do that; but if you miscalculated, there could be a nasty pay-off. He couldn't afford it...

Feeling sorry for him, perhaps, Basov did not say a word or reproach him. If you thought about it, then it wasn't easy to say who had given whom the lesson. One thing rattled him—the expressed rightness was on Basov's side. Would they really have failed to get out of the jam had it not been for those half million?.. They would have found a solution! Gatilin suspected that by the time the ill-fated cross-country trucks arrived, Basov al-

ready knew how to lay a pipeline without them—the brain trust was incapable of sitting and twiddling his thumbs. But to ask Basov about it would have meant owning up to his own weakness, and he would never have admitted it to himself, let alone the others. Which was why, perhaps, he was being excessively captious and jumpy.

Basov had the habit of closeting himself in his office from ten o'clock until twelve, as a rule. He did not invite people over for that time and did not send for anyone, but sat there, thinking and analysing. Everybody on the project knew these times and tried not to bother the chief. Gatilin had no cause to disturb the set routine, but once, feeling out of sorts, he decided to make a fuss. He rolled into Basov's entrance room, but his way was barred by a doll, a scraggy red-head who squeaked in a broken voice:

"Viktor Sergeyevich, Viktor Sergeyevich!"

"What about Viktor Sergeyevich?" he barked, and so loudly that he thought he'd frightened the girl to death.

She clucked away like a chicken, then finally found her voice.

"Excuse me," she said, "but I must ask you not to come inside in that mood..."

"In that state..." must be what she had meant to say. His appearance was certainly wild, though he couldn't remember why now. But that this pullet could stop him offended Gatilin so much that he must have stood there dumbfounded for a moment, his eyes bulging. Then he roared, bristled, reduced the girl to tears and pulled the door open.

"Stop crashing about, Viktor Sergeyevich," said Basov calmly to him from the threshold. "It's not nice..." He then apologised to the girl on Gatilin's behalf.

They sorted it out later as they both calmed down. "You and I are like different gears," said

Gatilin angrily. "We ought to be turning together, but we just can't seem to mesh..." This was true and untrue. Basov had often personally invited Gatilin to the various sites, and Viktor Sergeyevich had gone with him, helped him to sort out the shortcomings, noted and discussed the schedules, had confirmed them, and yet, strange to say, dissatisfaction had mounted in his soul along with the satisfaction. It was as if he were being trained or inured to a system introduced before his time, and he realised how agonisingly long he had been getting into the swing of the job. It irritated him to hear, "Basov, Basov, Basov!" at every step. Gatilin could not help feeling that even when they were addressing him, people were mentally looking over their shoulders at their chief. As for Basov, he did not consider it necessary to go into details. "Sort it out yourself. Ask Gatilin's advice..."

What was this—inflated vanity, a rare gift, talent? Gatilin could not find a simple explanation. He looked with prejudice on everything that could in any way diminish or boost his authority. Was it fair, he thought, that the one should slave day and night, consult, compare, argue over deliveries, with incredible straining of forces affirm his authority, while the other could allow himself to go to the local hops, or the cinema, set off on a hunting expedition on a day off, sit down in his office and isolate himself from the others, merely exchanging a couple of words over the intercom to know what was going on where; seeing everything, doing everything, keeping everything under control, twisting and turning all the time, and still having the effrontery to harass and pressure Gatilin...

But Gatilin's day of triumph arrived.

Basov submitted for confirmation a new river-closing project. The calculations had been checked and were accurate. Gatilin did not express even a

shadow of doubt! He simply drew Basov's attention to the time limits of the operation, which were very tight, almost logically unacceptable here in the North... A risk! Was it absolutely necessary? Finally, was it justified? After all, apart from the younger man's keenness, fire and eagerness to shine—a noble eagerness and understandable at such an age—there were no objective prerequisites in favour, no guarantees... Basov blushed like a little boy. "I'm not convinced," continued Gatilin, "that they'll give us the okay for such dubious experiments..."

No, Gatilin admitted that the project might be confirmed. So much the better! Rightness, backed by impressive support from above, would add to Basov's self-confidence: he'd overdo it. And then, right or wrong, two bears couldn't be kept in the same cave. At this point, Gatilin caught himself thinking that without Basov he would find the work more boring, although more peaceful. What he needed was another Basov, only one a shade more flexible and malleable. But come to think of it, no one could be more malleable than Korostylev, but he could dig his heels in too...

Gatilin had miscalculated somewhere. Basov did not even take offence at him for refusing to endorse the project. They even got on well after Moscow had approved it. The strangest thing of all was that Gatilin constantly, and increasingly, had a feeling, not exactly of guilt before Basov or the gnawings of the conscience, but an irritating sense of indebtedness to him.

After all, they weren't forcing Gatilin; for some reason he had to trail after Basov. He did not want to believe, and would not grant, that the other could also have sleepless nights, torture himself, suffer. From Gatilin's point of view, it looked as if success came too easily to Basov, too smoothly; that it had not been earned with even a fraction of the physical exertions and anguish of

mind, hidden from outsiders, which only Gatilin knew, and this pointed to a higher injustice that he did not deserve, was not subordinate to him and was driving him crazy.

Clearly, his wildness was noticeable to the rest, otherwise why did Pyotr Alimushkin, the Party Organiser, once comment to him nervously:

"Viktor Sergeyevich, don't swing the lasso too hard. That sort of thing isn't done here."

He must admit to himself, as now, during the night before river-closing operation, that at least he wanted equality with Basov, if not moral superiority over him, but he was having to give way. "What could be simpler—take down thy pride and be calm, humble thyself..." He mocked himself with cunning desperation, and promptly thought in earnest: "Perhaps I really should humble myself, eh?" After all, he went on, trying to convince himself, all dissatisfaction in us is a worm of doubt. And are we not bound to obey it, so as to act contrary to reason afterwards?

...Meanwhile, the Gazik had driven into the settlement. The wheels swished lazily over the asphalt, almost as lazily and wearily as Gatilin's thoughts.

The young driver, determinedly not noticing the changes in the moods of the boss, was smiling at something. He was biting his puffy lower lip and his mouth was twisted with suppressed laughter.

"Are you riding a tortoise or driving a car?" said Gatilin furiously. "The way you're smacking your lips..."

Still smiling serenely, the lad changed up into third. The car jerked, as if about to spring, and shot ahead as it were carrying Gatilin forward into the present day, suggested by Basov a year ago as the day for the damming of the river. Now that date had been confirmed by the weathermen, but for the chief of the construction project management the long awaited twenty-third of September

was beginning differently from the way he would have wished.

Gatilin had not expected that the night, which had not seemed to bode any unpleasantness at all, would leave him so enervated. He was tired out, but only felt it at home, in the morning, when he got out of the Gazik and looked angrily at Basov's window opposite. The light was on. "He's still codding himself..." thought Gatilin. But the day ahead was such that they both had enough to worry about, except that Basov had yet to start on them, and Gatilin was already up to the ears in them. And what was driving him up the wall was that he had not seen the chief engineer on the sites, had not heard of him ringing up the sectors, asking questions, worrying. Rather to the contrary: Silin and his kind were even guarding Basov's privacy... Gatilin banished from his mind the nagging thought that Basov could have other important things to do. But what? There were different views on what was important. Moreover, Basov was young and healthy, he didn't take heart drops and could have spared Gatilin's nerves. True, Basov didn't compel or even ask Gatilin to rush round the sites; but what need was there to ask? Each acted according to his conscience on this project, and it was obvious what a load each had to bear...

It was not hard for Gatilin to guess that now, early in the morning, Basov would hurry off to catch up with lost time. If so, it would be an idea to intercept him on the threshold with a telephone call and without reproaching Basov for softness and boyish cockiness, say that he, Gatilin, had already visited the Aniva and the sites, from the closure channel and the concrete factory to the workshops, garages and the quarry... He should needle Basov with his nobility, as if nothing special had happened—just that Comrade Gatilin had diligently fulfilled his obligations. But in the

morning, at the management meeting, Comrade Basov, my fellow, you yourself will note the ardour or zeal (what's your word for it?) of the head of the project. And, indeed, what sort of a boss would he be if he had not avail himself of the opportunity even at such a moment to show how one must work, how one must go about one's duties. It's not like getting belts... Damming the river is only an incident in the life of the project; the most important part begins in the foundation pit, and tonight is an excellent opportunity to demand of Basov, and of others, no less zeal for the future.

Unaware of his breathlessness, Gatilin hurried up the staircase to his flat.

He was not surprised that his wife, Varvara Timofeyevna, was not asleep at such a late hour. He did not notice her flushed cheeks and stern expression, although he looked at her while the telephone operator was calling Basov and there was no answer from his home number. Gatilin tugged hopelessly at the line, waited a moment, then put down the receiver.

Basov had beaten him to it and gone out.

He had a sudden impulse to dash outside, get into the Gazik before it left, catch him up and speak his mind to that youngster, blurt out in the open street everything that was on his mind and give him hell! But the thought was light as smoke, it was not like Gatilin at all, and, on second thought, he realised that his black thoughts would get him nowhere...

He was tired.

All night in a boneshaker of a Gazik... Smoky huts of the crane operators and the motor transport dispatchers... In boots plastered with lumps of mud, he had squelched through the sludge on the left bank (somewhere to one side of and behind the bulldozers and excavators)... Down

a vertical ladder—goodness knows why—into a recess in the discharge tunnel. The acrid dust of cement near the concrete-mixers... The stink of exhaust gases during the trials of the tip-up lorries (powerful jobs from the Kremenchug Motor Works, he noticed with a joyful throbbing of the heart that repeated itself as in the garage), and perhaps the only thing he missed out was the kitchen of the "White Bear", but they were also preparing for the morrow in the restaurant. It had been his idea to arrange a banquet for the tamers of the Aniva. And everything—fatigue, irritation, shouting, hoarse swearing, soot and oil—was still with him, had ingrained itself in the skin of his face, hands, in his throat, was reacting as a nagging pain in his arms and the small of his back, and, perhaps, because of all this, he was feeling slightly sick; but it could be the effects of smoking. In the fever, in the effort to keep up with himself, Gatilin had taken a packet of Belomor from someone and had lit up after thirty years of abstention.

Everything done the night before had been necessary and even vital to the project, and Gatilin in general had been responsible for it. But tomorrow—no, today!—no one would ask him about any disrupted rhythm that might occur, and tomorrow no one would report to him on the readiness of the services and the sectors for the blocking operation. He was virtually not needed by anyone at that moment, and it was so obvious that he was depressed by the emptiness and meaninglessness of his efforts... It was easy for him to convince himself to the contrary, but at a moment of weakness, even self-abasement seems agreeable, and, with a grin, Gatilin compared himself to a coachman sitting on the box, but without any reins. His puffy lips parted slightly in an ironic smile which soon faded, but the doubt remained. Why? Wasn't it because there was more

truth in the comparison than he wanted? Gatilin now understood what had been troubling him in the night and hounding him from sector to sector: things were moving without him.

His thought rested on that; he did not notice himself repeating aloud:

"The carriage is rolling alone without me..."

Although she was watching Gatilin, Varvara did not hear what he said. She preferred not to ask. Gatilin's face was too bitter and glum. She knew that at such moments it was best to leave him in peace until the bad spell was over; then you could twist strings out of him...

Strings?

People close to one another have moments when the thought of one is transmitted wordlessly to the other. Gatilin could not see Varya's face; he was looking vaguely at the floor, his hand, resting on the telephone, was still gripping the receiver. He realised that he was in a bad mood, not because of the swearing and the exhaustion, but because he, who had given his life to construction projects, had been stepped round at the critical hour like a dead horse. His brain, feeding on his blood, was repeating at an accelerated tempo, was drumming it into Gatilin, was pumping words like bullets into his consciousness: "Without you! Without you! Without you!" And suddenly something gave way in his mind, began to skid after falling on to something as friable as sand, and there was an alien word—"string". "However much string you twine... What's that got to do with it?" he wondered. Perhaps Varya had said something. No, she was silent. She would not say it, she had yet to understand and live through the folly of her husband's stupid failure. When she realised it all, she would begin to lecture, upbraid and admonish him. And however strange it might seem, he would feel better for her senseless nagging. But why was he, only now prepared to admit to

himself that even without him the work was proceeding normally which meant that everything done by him up to that day, that minute, had been done correctly, ready even to agree that there was nothing bad or damaging to him in the appointment of Basov as chief of headquarters for the river-operation—why did he no longer think that way? Why had he suddenly remembered the excited faces of the local Party Committee members when this question was being decided, and why only now did he feel a bitter dislike of Alimushkin with his humanism, his cut-and-dried programme of democracy on the construction site and his principles? In the final analysis, it wasn't a matter of the powers given to Basov... It had come to nothing, the power that had raised Gatilin over people, that had raised him not high, in his own view, but high enough for his power to be respected, his word and even a glance, at the necessary moment, cold and going right through a man... But now what?

And, as if seeing himself from outside, Gatilin was appalled at the weakness with which he had finally taken his hand away from the telephone, and he waved it, brushing away the unbidden thoughts; and with this gesture he expressed all his despair. He stood before Varya, pretending not to notice her, but feeling ill-at-ease.

Varya caught him with her elbow as she walked past and he stepped out of the way. At home, in his own flat, like a visitor. He must pull himself together, talk to himself, talk to the real Gatilin who could keep his equilibrium, who knew how to cope with difficulties and who knew if not with his mind, at least with his heart, what was awaiting him on the next day. It was essential for him to concentrate now if he was to be capable of making decisions later.

Never before had Gatilin known himself so divided. No doubt he had once been younger and

stronger. But would it really be so difficult to get over what he was going through now? He had been very jittery, especially on the platform, and had trotted around all night hungry as a wolf, and then he had started smoking... If Varya did not feed him now, there would be no time for optimism, look how many causes were piling up!

Gatilin smiled guiltily at his wife, who was watching him through the kitchen door. His big, gloomy face brightened. Varya sighed heavily in answer and went to lay the table. Still feeling weak, Gatilin thought how little he saw of his wife. In some way she resembled his sister Katya, who had died in the blockade of Leningrad [1]. Both could marvel at goodness knows what trifles. Or were all women so naive? And he remembered for some reason his own childhood, the orphanage near Vyborg where he and Katya had lived and grown up, and the majestic oak on the outskirts of the forest beyond the meadow. There was something special about that tree which was why they feared yet loved to go and visit it... Once, in spring, Katya had insisted that they go to the oak-tree together. She was apparently inviting him to go gathering acorns, and he had refused. Acorns in spring? She was afraid of something, but he never found out what... He never acknowledged his fears, neither then, at twelve years against her seven, nor afterwards... They got wet in the grass on the way there; the sun was shining into the glade and a damp, gusty wind was blowing. The branches of the oak-tree were prickly with swollen buds. The wind ruffled Katya's hair; she pressed it to her ear to keep it out of her eyes and, with her head thrown back, looked up at the oak for a long time.

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[1] A reference to the 900-day blockade of Leningrad during the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945.—*Ed.*

"Viktor, did it hurt him when he split in two?" she suddenly asked.

He giggled, but the top of the oak had indeed been struck by lightning; the bark and wood were charred, but curly russet buds were nevertheless visible on the lifeless top branches. In the cleft, a rook or hen-harrier had crammed a new nest not yet soiled with droppings...

Gatilin could not explain to himself why he had remembered that cold, uneasy day, but the troubled bitterness that he had suffered till that moment seemed to have been dulled in his soul, and he was glad of it. The oak had held out, but what about him?

The burly Gatilin stood in the middle of the room without taking off the dark-brown fur coat, worn after much travel and warped by the rains. The russet fur lining, turned out at the cuffs, was worn to the nap, the coat was noticeably frayed, but it still fitted him snugly and kept him warm. Gatilin had lost count of the winters he had been wearing it. But today, the beaver-lamb collar had bulged noticeably, betraying the heavy stoop of the broad, usually straight shoulders. The brush of hair on the big head with its vertical brow had long been grey. On the table in front of Gatilin, near the telephone, lay a woollen bonnet with a silly pom-pom knitted by Varya. It was grey with cement dust, like his coat collar. Gatilin looked at it, clenching his wide jaws, and his jowels bulged.

He could not distinctly hear what Varya was saying. She, too, was tired after her sleepless night, although it was clear what she was talking about; it was enough to look round more closely... She had come to Barakhsan for a week only—or perhaps two—she'd see about it!.. She replied flippantly to her husband's grumbles, but, to tell the truth, Varya herself did not know precisely when she would be fed up with being there...

They usually lived apart: she in Moscow, he on

the construction sites, and Varya, a stout woman with a ready smile, used to tell her acquaintances, not without pride, that they had developed a tradition, meaning "kismet", a word that she had had to renounce in maturity for cultural reasons.

Varya's relatives (mainly female, a whole bouquet of dusty paper flowers consisting of various aunts and aunties) regarded their marriage with scepticism. But when Gatilin, demobilised after the war, got himself fixed up in the Ministry of Civil Engineering, they breathed freely at last, assured that Varya's life would now shape out well. True, they did not omit to lecture her from time to time: keep that Viktor of yours in hand, keep an eye on him in case some slip of a girl carries him off... But Varya and Gatilin attached no importance to these warnings.

Life in the capital, to which they moved after Podolsk, flowed smoothly and uneventfully; a year passed like a day. At the end of the third year of this life, Gatilin, to Varya's surprise, left on a long-term posting, as he put it, to the Trans-Baikal.

It was hard to judge—was it a burst of weakness or of despair? Was it a spiritual upsurge, or would he have done better to stay? Supposing, instead of walking round the high mountain all these years, he could have reached the top? It might be one or the other; but during his hours of spiritual equilibrium, Gatilin was not seduced by vain dreams. He did not consider himself too ambitious, and everything that he had attained in life—even if only this job as head of the construction management on the Aniva—had always been solid and substantial, everything had suited him down to the ground and he, as master of his own words and deeds, was not afraid of storms or shocks, although he knew that the Aniva was not the end for him. There would be other river banks, sure enough!

But then... Then what? He felt that he hadn't enough knowledge, he could not think big, he had not had any experience of administrative work in civil engineering, especially before the war. His experience was associated with the front, where everything was makeshift—river crossings,dug-outs and river crossings again... Perhaps, at the time, intuition had told Gatilin that work in the administration was without a future. People far more expert and skilled in the refinements of ministry service were waiting for their next promotion year by year and captiously watching the rough-seeming front-line men. All these, their war medals jingling, nimbly saluting one another and reluctantly parting with their army tunics, were venomously dubbed "queue-jumpers" by the old hands. They called Gatilin that behind his back, with the only difference that they sceptically added: "Well, that one will wait his turn!.." And Gatilin sensed this attitude towards him from the mocking glances and nasty smirks when he happened to get into a jam. To take offence and prove the opposite was pointless, the more so that Gatilin had never been afraid of work—yelling himself hoarse on the job—and this gave him an advantage over the *apparatchiks.*

When he left for the project, he did not take Varya with him. He had anticipated her objection to the idea of moving, and he had to think about his daughter too—little Galya would be going to school in the autumn, and the place he was leaving for had no accommodation, not even barrack huts—just tents.

On the day of his departure, discussing everything in haste, some of Varya's friends were with them. Gatilin had forgotten and perhaps had never even remembered their faces, and if the pictures of that remote time floated up in his memory, if he could clearly and distinctly see Varya's whitetoothed smile and hear the cadences of her

strong but not unpleasant voice, nevertheless all Varya's friends were one face for him. Not even one face, but a blurred, feeble flame flickering in the dark like a candle. The candle was tightly swathed in a black jacket. Someone, probably, had looked like that and was vaguely remembered...

He used to marvel at Varya's ability to make friends easily with people and because she always had many friends about her, but she hadn't the slightest idea who some of them were or where they came from. It could be thought that they were drawn to her like moths to a flame, but no, they were all worried about caries of the milk teeth, the subject of Varya's thesis. It was unlikely that these countless acquaintances and acquaintanceships could seriously help Varya, but Gatilin agreed: caries was caries, so what could you do!.. However, he was flattered that Varya was not marking time after institute but was keen on science. He would have thought less about this if the science had been a purely feminine privilege, and neither then nor afterwards did it occur to him that the advantage of women like Varya over men was that they achieved far more by concessions than by zeal.

After having seen more than enough of the nomadic existence of his fellow builders, Gatilin believed that others could live their whole lives like that, but not he. In point of fact, project was followed by project, Varya's visits were infrequent and short, and she would disappear again. In his memory he sometimes sinned and suspected her of goodness knows what... She's a woman after all, he would think condescendingly and in the third person; she wasn't so old that she'd lost her appeal...

With his reputation for expansiveness, and supporting this image of himself, Gatilin rarely considered how true breadth of feeling and

conduct are singled out not by external scope, but by depth and moral purity of ideas, without which the most noble aspirations become petty and ridiculous. If there were ever melodramas in his life, Gatilin would laugh a little afterwards, attributing them to the weakness inherent in him as in all humankind. Yes, the comparison here could only be with humankind!..

If Gatilin and his wife had ever revealed what they thought of one another, they would probably have agreed that they were most suited as a pair, and only eccentrics could have maintained that for family happiness and peace, apart from love and children, there was also a need for things in common, concerns and the kinship of souls invented by the poets... Who thinks of such things in our days anyway? What an era! You hardly have time to digest what you've heard during the day, let alone think about the soul or the spirit... When? It's different with the young; before they're all screwed up, let them learn a thing or two, let them philosophise, just so long as they don't addle their brains...

At work, they thought of Varya as a strong, masterful woman. "Temperamental," agreed Gatilin, and grinned to himself. He had become convinced of her will-power more than once. No one, except him, knew that Varya, in spite of her stoutness, breathlessness and constant complaints of pains in the heart, loved moving furniture about, shifting cupboards, tables, chairs and stools to suit her fancy, carrying the television set from one corner of the room to the other, adding shelves, and quite happy to convert her husband's study into a bedroom and vice versa. You had to see how she was transformed by all this, and her enthusiasm almost compensated for her lack of experience and of skill as a housewife.

While thus occupied, she used to sing. Probably not as well as in her younger days, but the

experience of the school choir still made itself felt. The same songs lasted her a long time, without wear, almost like gramophone records, for something like ten years. At first, "Katyusha", then "See someone's come down the hill". Her current favourite was, "Oh, where shall I find such a song...", but sometimes, as if trying out a new one and getting used to it, she would start singing, "My address is no house and no street, My address is the Soviet Union..."—the most contemporary youth song; but in general Varya had not yet decided which one was going to come next.

Gatilin was used to it, when Varya had arrived, that the rattling of dishes in the kitchen was interrupted by her contralto (although she should have sung in a higher pitch) somewhere in the middle of the line: "That my song might fly all the land over, And speek to somebody of love, Take somebody into the mea..."—but the expected "Take somebody into the meadow, Lure somebody into the grove" might not come for another minute, two minutes, or even sometimes a quarter of an hour, and it invariably began on the same interrupted notes: "...mea-dow, Lure somebody into the grove..." and so on. A nightingale would not have been impressed, but Gatilin... It had been like that in the Urals, on the Karadag project; it had been like that in the officers' staff house in the village in Chita region where Gatilin had gone after the ministry, and it was like that here. In Barakhsan, however, Varya amazed him even more with a ficus plant in a wooden tub. Its leaves reddish with dust, it stood in the corridor of Gatilin's office and no one knew where to put it. Now, suddenly, it was in his own flat!

"Whatever for, Varya?"

"Aesthetics lends grace to life," she replied tersely.

Gatilin thought that his wife's voice sounded guilty, and at first he couldn't understand what it

was all about. Upset, she angrily tugged the needle along the seam of a new, apparently Italian raincoat. Gatilin imagined how that coat must have slithered and crackled when she walked in the twilight street along the main street, pressing the heavy tub to her breast. The coat had been stretched, and one of the seams had come undone.

"You brought it yourself?" he asked unbelievingly.

"Fancy asking!"

Supper was not ready that day. It was a wonder that the kitchen sink was still there. For some reason, a coffee table had migrated into the kitchen, a box of broken crockery had been piled on top of it, the massive four-plate electric stove had been wheeled from the window to the door, and after it trailed a length of flex, torn out of the wall.

And Gatilin, to annoy his wife, asked with the earnestness of which only he was capable:

"Have you moved the bath and the WC pan too?"

"Of course! I've taken the WC pan downstairs, and the bath's in the attic..."

Gatilin roared with laughter. If Varya's sense of humour had not deserted her, then all her combinations would end where they began, and as soon as that happened, it meant she had decided to go. But he had not expected it to happen so soon.

On looking round, he saw his flat in its former pre-Varya order, as he called it, and there was not even a sign of the blue-paper-wrapped tub with the ficus.

It was a pity he didn't feel up to cracking jokes. Varya's plans were clear... He was far more irritated that Basov had vanished under his nose—now guess where he was and what he was up to! All it needed was for him to find cause to reproach Gatilin at the river-closing operation

tomorrow. And the man could do just that!.. He remembered how at night, by the closure channel, Silin had grumbled when Gatilin was going to let the searchlights stay on till morning. A failure, a trifle; but why did Silin have to refer to Basov? If Silin or Korostylev had said nothing, if they had left the lights on, even only up to Gatilin's departure, he might have calmed down long ago. Never mind Basov! No one had ever relieved Gatilin of his responsibility either... Yes, it was all logical, and convincing, only not for him. The fact was that Basov wasn't trotting round the project, and Gatilin didn't quite trust him or himself; he decided to be doubly certain, looked for something and found it... The sole consolation was that the project wasn't a car, you couldn't slam its door!..

Gatilin took the cigarettes out of his pocket, struck a match and lit up.

After all, he could admit to himself that he had done nothing that night. He'd ridden round on a tour of inspection. He'd helped the bulldozer operator pull the hawser to the excavator, he'd squelched about in the mud, he'd tested concrete mix with his fingers—but all this would have been done without him, and was, in fact, being done. There wasn't much point in his hovering about in front of people. And he suddenly blurted out:

"Varya, I'm a fool, don't you think?.."

"You're smoking again," she said sadly.

"Again..." he agreed. And he added with indifference in his voice, but secretly in the hope that it mattered to Varya: "But Basov slept well."

She didn't understand him right away. Naive in the moment of bewilderment, Varya had been thinking a minute ago that he felt bad about her going. God, he hadn't heard a word of what she had been saying, and she hadn't the energy to say it all over again.

Gatilin thrust his hands into the pockets of his coat and pulled it tightly round him.

"I must go," he said, without moving.

But there was nowhere to go.

Varya looked at his weathered face, darkened by the nocturnal cold, at the big nose with the broad, flattened bridge, at the dust-reddened eyes, and she felt sorry for him; he looked so downtrodden and tired. She somehow sensed that even now he was a long way away from her... At this point — perhaps for the first time — she regretted that their family life had been so inharmonious, proceeding by fits and starts, and so quickly.

The extinct cigarette sticking to Gatilin's puffy, compressed lips reminded her of the young Viktor whom she had first seen on a parachute-jumping tower. They had met and made-friends, both full of crazy dreams about training to fly. Fortunately, they never got any further than the practice tower. Viktor was rejected by a stiff medical board, while Varya was ridiculed and talked out of it by her relatives.

The thread of memories, catching the very beginning of their relationship, might slowly unwind the whole ball. Varya did not allow this to happen. The past softens the heart, and she did not want to give in to Gatilin that day. She did not want him to give in to himself, but that was what always happened when Gatilin ignored her advice... Varya sighed loudly, indicating that she wanted his attention.

"Viktor," she said, "you know that I've..."

"...reached degrees of the known!" Gatilin smiled suddenly and shrugged one shoulder, surveying the room again, Varya, her tightly packed suitcases, and he continued, sighing noisily, like her: "I know, Varya, I know. You always start serious talks with that. You've got somewhere, and I haven't, in your opinion. It begins and ends with that. Is it worth it today, Varya? You've got one foot in a plane, and I'm staying here. It's a dog's life, isn't that so?"

Ignoring his irony, she raised her voice:

"D'you know why I flew here to see you?"

Why? If there had been a special reason, the subject should have been raised at least on the day of arrival! But why ask when the suitcases were packed? His dearest spouse would now demand immediate despatch, as if it were Moscow, where all you have to do was to call a taxi and roll off to any station. However much these whims may have got him down, Gatilin had become used to them with the years. But — and this was worse — Varya didn't want to wait for the river-closing operation, and she knew perfectly well how much it meant to him. And compared with that, her conversation... He'd do better to catch up on his sleep. On such a day, a cheerful, well-turned-out manager is worth more to the workers than a favourable barometer reading, and if he had known that Varya had packed, he would have stayed in the administrative building and had a nap there in his own office... She wanted him to swear he would leave for Moscow at the first opportunity. Now, of all times! With a foolish smile on his face, Gatilin asked:

"Why did you come?"

"Really!.." Varya snorted, realising that she had got off to a bad start.

She looked appraisingly at her husband. "The head of a construction management," she felt like saying, "and look at you! You look like a plumber! Plastered with mud and cement, shirt dusty, covered with stains, sheepskin coat rumpled like a bedspread. He's tired, poor dear!.." But she was not deceived by his outward appearance this time. He was a powerful, well-built man under whose strong armour beat a heart as soft as wax. True, Gatilin could be bold and explosive, but Varya had long ceased to be shocked by this, and she calmly met his demonically cold glare from under the shaggy brows. He could, when necessary, also

pretend to be a simpleton; but if, back there in 1940 before the war, she had known what she would become herself and what he would be, she would have wondered whether to marry him... During the war he had served with the engineers, had been wounded and decorated; but Varya did not know what he had done and seen. If she asked, he said nothing or dodged the issue: "I'm in one piece—what more d'you want?" She knew just as little about what he had built. She would arrive and see houses, schools, roads, then dams, canals, medium-sized factories, foundation pits and garages—and he would boast: "That's mine, that's me!" Everything was commonplace, the same as everywhere else, and she was not impressed...

With time, Gatilin was becoming an ordinary, well-nourished administrative man of average standing and he seemed unaware of his ordinariness. She was truly sorry that his youthful ardour and dreams had burned themselves out and turned grey, like paper in the sun. Nothing was left of the old enthusiasm. Was the Aniva his ceiling?

After the wedding, they lived for nearly a year in Podolsk. Then came the war... Gatilin returned wearing a captain's shoulder tabs, a creaky officer's belt and straps, with medals and even an Order of the Red Star. Remembering that he couldn't stand her aunts, she advised him to go to Moscow. "They're bound to give you a decent job," she said, nodding at the medals. "Go straight to the Ministry." He didn't go, of course, but she remained content that he had listened to her. The reward was a two-room flat—not in the city centre, it was true, but on Sokolinaya Gora, with central heating, nevertheless, water and a telephone. She must not fall behind him, and to be able to work in the clinic, she had to give a room to one of the Podolsk aunties, who sat with Galya while Varya worked on children's dentistry.

Until her thesis had been accepted, she simply hadn't time for him, to put it bluntly, for several years. But she had achieved degrees of the known! And that's not as funny as you think, Gatilin. And now you... You more or less made a name for yourself at Karadag, when you were promoted from being a tuppenny-ha'penny deputy to head of the management of supporting enterprises. Two years there were enough for you to show your worth. That's enough, said Varya. But he didn't want to give up what he'd started... "Oh, Gatilin, Gatilin, you've soon forgotten everything! But I," thought Varya, "don't intend to stage production conferences. I'm still a woman and I'm still your wife..." With a reproachful look on her face, blinking, she sniffed suddenly and, covering her face with her hands, hastily left the room.

Gatilin peered after her. He really had offended her. He refused to acknowledge tears, but they were unpleasant. Now he must wait and pretend that nothing had happened.

Women! On her way to the kitchen, Varya actually did burst into tears, but she was unable to leave Gatilin for long. She washed her face and, although hurrying back to her husband, managed to run a comb through her hair. On the way, out of habit, she licked her fingers and smoothed her eyebrows. She was not afraid that Gatilin would reach for his hat—and goodbye. Men are always men, and when they are at fault, they are particularly considerate. Give them just one medicine: let a pair of hands caress them, let fond eyes look at them and a consoling voice whisper gently into their ear: "My dear, my own, my love..." And Varya went with dignity to perform her unavoidable task.

She knew what she wanted. She could threaten anyone now, humiliate them, show them the door; but the lost peace of mind depended on

Gatilin, and she had to handle him differently, and she was impelled to do this by her natural instinct and desperation caused by the still distant roar of disaster that could shake her secret hopes. She could not allow a whim of fate to ruin the foundations of Gatilin's future, which she had built with her own hidden exertions.

III

There are many rivers in Russia and there are some even bigger and more majestic than the Aniva. Big and small, they are celebrated in song, and in legend they are wedded to the destiny of the people, because wherever they flow—through forests, across the steppes, over mountain ranges and across the lowlands—they bear life with them. Much-famed are the great Mother Volga and the Dnieper Slavutich, the Yenisei and Grandfather Amur. They are all giant rivers. But the Aniva cannot be compared even with the Dvina, the Pechora, with the calm Oka and the steep, temperamental and by no means large River Volkhov.

For ages, man never settled on its banks. Neither the felon, nor the runaway convict, nor the peaceful emigrant from Russia, nor the inscrutable Evenk, nor the patient Yakut—no one, not a soul, sought happiness or shelter on its banks. Very rarely did there come down from the upper reaches a nomad Nganasani on a swift boat, a manoeuvrable *vetka,* his amazed and watchful sloe eyes following a flock of startled *allushka* ducks—and once more it would be quiet, once more for days or years the smooth, flat expanse of water would flow there in mysterious desolation.

Once, in ancient times, fishermen visited the estuary of the Aniva. The nets they drew up were full and heavy, but not one of them even thought of settling there. Why should they? A steamer

would not turn off here on its way along the Yenisei; it would go past; a flock of swans would head out to sea, but would not come down; the wild reindeer, the *shagzhoi*—even he would not go near it... Was he also frightened by the rocky heights, the steep cliffs, and, just like the reed-beds of the Don, the impenetrable thickets of narrow-leaved rose-willows through which there was no passage, neither for man nor beast? The area is full of game, which had evidently inured to the silence and the desolation.

What had finally brought man to a land where the far away boundaries of the stunted and consumptive Arctic taiga merge into those of the tundra, covered with its shroud of white snows, and where the Aniva runs like a frontier line between them?..

...Not long before the first builders flew into the Arctic Circle, one of the Moscow newspapers carried a brief report on the future construction project. It was noticed abroad, where it was the subject of animated discussion among the experts.

Never before in the world had a hydroelectric station been built inside the Arctic Circle. Lost in the snows, the Aniva flowed north of the 69th parallel. Moreover, it had become known abroad that a considerable part of the preparatory work on the Aniva project had been done by Academician Malyshev, a distinguished construction and power engineer, who had in his time been blessed by Krzhyzhanovsky[1] himself. In scientific circles, the name of Tikhon Svetozarovich Malyshev was associated not only with the Moskva-Volga Canal, but with the Serpukhov Synchrophasotron, with the University on Lenin Hills, with the first atomic power station, with the Bratsk Hydroelectric Power Station and many other construction

[1] G. M. Krzhyzhanovsky (1872-1959)—Soviet statesman and Party figure, scientist and electric power engineer.— *Ed.*

projects for the national economy. Knowing of this, it must not be thought that the Aniva was a trifling and hare-brained scheme, as several Western journalists suggested. Their interests were particularly stimulated by the fact that some years ago the news had come out of Malyshev's withdrawal from active affairs.

Malyshev was almost seventy, his powers were waning and he had to make haste and pass on his experience to posterity. He did not fear that big word, knowing that the future belonged to the young. Disappointed many times in his long and hard life by the repetition of his own mistakes, he felt a kind of good-natured indulgence towards even his most talented pupils: if only they could avoid that!.. What could be more saddening to a scientist if not a feeling of helplessness about the impossibility of accomplishing one's plans?.. Just as, say, Tsiolkovsky[1], after creating the theory of space travel, himself could not go on a flight. His thought trajectory was too daring, too advanced for that time. And where was the guarantee that the like could not happen again?.. That this was not one of the paradoxes of creativeness, of the power of scientific foresight? And if so, then daring thought should anticipate man's actual abilities! It was like wings, and the presence of it, that Great Thought, would never be stifled in the soul...

Malyshev saw the distant future as far more happy and generous with the opportunities that it would offer to each person for his daring. Anxious not so much to ease the journey for others as to warn of possible dangers and temptations on that journey, Malyshev hastened to put up sign-posts, passing on his experience, addressing to the indefatigable seekers his own notes and thoughts

[1] K. E. Tsiolkovsky (1857-1935)—Soviet Russian scientist and inventor.— *Ed.*

on the life of the construction engineer. "Time," he wrote, "will clearly show you our imperfections when you gratefully harvest the ripe grain of our experience. Separate the chaff from the wheat; not much gold will be left on the palm of your hands, but it will be proof that we did not struggle and take risks in vain... After all, the life of the generations warms itself at the fire of reason, and we all fill our hearts with a feeling of gratitude to those of our predecessors whose lives illumine the darkness of the ages with flashes of lightning..."

When he was reflecting on his past, Malyshev was not troubled by his miscalculations as a designer. He sought the reasons behind narrow-mindedness. He was worried and alarmed by the ideas and principles of dogmatic logic, that rigid floor of the dam that holds back technical progress and creative thought in general.

He feared that deceptively easy state of mind when life is taking its own course, and it was called Khoteyevism by people close to Malyshev. Primitivism in science (if science could still be called science under the circumstances), hare-brained schemes, servility, flattery—all this was inseparable to the old scientist from the image of the once respectable (and even held in honour today!) engineer Khoteyev.

Secluded in the quiet of his study at home on Smolensk Boulevard, Malyshev continued working. After the many big and important matters to which he had dedicated his life, only now could he accomplish something the advantages of which were being determined without heed of the losses—the ideal formula towards which he had always striven. The Arctic, as a gigantic, inexhaustible reserve of energy, was changing from a long-cherished dream into reality. The notes and calculations made by Malyshev over the years were the basis of a plan for the Aniva Industrial-Economic Zone, in which one of the priority

targets was to be the building of a hydroelectric station on the Big Rapids of the Aniva.

When the higher authorities sanctioned the project, Malyshev entrusted Basov with the formation of the advance party (helping him with it personally to some extent) and invited the team to his flat—principally to tell them that apart from electric energy, the prime mover of technical progress in the century, the only thing he rated higher was the work accomplished by the mind and soul of man, whose experience sets history in motion...

There was nothing superhuman or incomprehensible in the bearing and words of the old man, and one of the team, Vasily Korostylev, thought that, unfortunately, academicians were more accessible than academic titles... But wasn't that the charm of meeting one perhaps already wearied by local and world fame and longing to mix with just such awkward and unsophisticated young men? The great deeds of which he spoke did not, for Malyshev, shut out anything of ordinary life, and he won over the advance party, to judge by their shining eyes, simply by convincing them that there is nothing better than the beauty revealed in a man when always and in everything he remains true to himself.

"But why in the North?.." asked one of the lads, meaning the dam.

"To melt the ice," joked Snegirev.

Malyshev laughed with them and was about to reply, when Anna Odarchenko, the only girl with the advance party, plucked up the courage to ask Malyshev in full voice:

"Tikhon Svetozarovich, d'you think that we ought to be a special kind of people? Well ... beautiful and harmonious, as the media say nowadays, or is it enough to be ordinary?"

"Ordinary, as I see it, but beautiful!" He laughed again and bowed his head slightly to

Anya. "But why not,' if it's possible? The conditions are entirely suitable... I have in mind not only the frost and the cold! The north is a land of wonders, especially Taimyr. Nature has hidden the rarest treasures in that storehouse. I don't know whether you have heard or not, but I'm personally amazed: the ores of Talnakh contain half the Mendeleyev table, fifty-three chemical elements!.. A most rare concentration for richness and variety," he commented, as if in parenthesis, and then continued: "I don't know if you are interested or not, but you can even find a 'stellar' mineral in the Talnakh ores, that is, Jefferisite, first discovered in meteorite fragments, believe it or not... And out there, in Taimyr, there are minerals of which we had no conception before. You're not geologists, but such names as Mayakite, Polarite, Zvyagintsevite—whatever they may tell you, these are all compounds of palladium and platinum, and they're more valuable than gold. But the most simple and widespread compounds there are unusual, that's what is so interesting! Not long ago, an international minerals commission confirmed that a new form of copper pyrites had been found in Talnakh—copper, iron, sulphur—in other words, chalcopyrite, but with an unusual crystal lattice. In theory, this kind of structure can be obtained artificially by heating and quick cooling the mineral, as is done when tempering steel, for example. But we are not talking about the laboratory, where so rapid a cooling of an enormous mineral deposit is impossible. On this basis the Americans, for instance, considered that a chalcopyrite with a cubic lattice does not exist in nature. In nature," smiled Malyshev, "it doesn't exist anywhere, but there is some on Talnakh. Incidentally, remember that's what it's called: Talnakhite!.."

Malyshev paused and glanced at Anya.

"What I'm driving at are the wonderful condi-

tions awaiting you in the North... You see, this old man is not being too ironical: the North, of course, is the North and no joking matter; but this, of course, is no grounds in the quest for the beautiful, harmonious and," he stressed, "well-off person to pollute the environment with leftovers. Whatever you choose for yourself out there, remaking, reforging or tempering—that's your concern! But there's an example, for it's in the North that the crystal lattice was born! In metals, that's understandable, but man..."

"Man is stronger than iron!" interrupted Anya heatedly, but with embarrassment.

Malyshev was silent, seeing that he had baffled them somewhat, had perhaps even embarrassed them with his "lecture", and hiding a smile, he asked, "Well, is the academician justifying himself? There are none wishing to be reeducated?.. Well? The first will get a preferential treatment for boldness—that, apparently, is what they say before exams!.."

For some reason he was looking at the massively broad-shouldered and presentable Korostylev. To his own surprise, Vasily blurted out:

"Count me out... I was a trouble-maker ever since I was a child."

"Lead melts easily..." commented Alimushkin with a sigh. He had not been particularly talkative that evening. He was the oldest member of the advance team. All knew that he was going to the Aniva as Party Organiser. His unfinished sentence, which had a kind of double meaning—in relation to the conversation in general and to Vasya's answer in particular—somehow seemed to serve as preliminary summing-up of their talk.

Pyotr Evseyevich Alimushkin had often thought about it himself. Man was the king of nature, but he was also its child. Penetrating into the secrets of matter and creation, having understood the

structure and movement of atoms, he had subdued the hidden energy of nature to the will and strength of the reason and had thereby magnified himself. The more effective and penetrating his congition became, the more eagerly man craved for confirmation and perfection. If this was the goal, then the road to it lay not so much through danger and sacrifice as through hard work. And this eternally indestructible striving was objectively mirrored by the laws of economics which lorded it over the world. Himself a builder by profession, Alimushkin experienced a special pleasure at the thought that however reasonable nature might be, nothing in it is comparable with the doings of man.

For him, Party Organiser of the Aniva Hydroelectric Construction Project, Party work had an entirely specific and clear meaning, and it consisted not only in responding to a Party directive with an official resolution at a meeting, and carrying out that resolution and directive, but also, as far as his ability and that of his comrades allowed, in forcefully creating an atmosphere of business-like relations on the project so that the work should become a spiritual necessity to each. The task was not in itself new, but was particularly difficult in the north, to where many people were rushing who hadn't given a hang about anything except lining their pockets.

Alimushkin believed, and very much wanted to believe, that if they succeeded in building a hydroelectric station, not crippling their souls, but elevating them, the work would be equivalent to the fulfilment of a Party and civic duty. As his father had fulfilled it when he died in the fighting outside Moscow. So Alimushkin was thinking now, after three years on the Aniva; but when they invited him for a chat in the management and said, "Pyotr Evseyevich, we have known you a long time..." and when he realised that a transfer was about to be discussed, even in his secret

thoughts he had never entertained as many alluring possibilities as the Aniva was hiding and gradually revealing to him. It would be more true to say to him, and to the others also.

The evening before, the management, the Party Committee, the Project Committee and the Young Communist Committee had confirmed the names of those who were to take part in the river-closing operation—two hundred and eleven men, of whom eighty were drivers, twenty were on bulldozers, as many were on excavators and cranes, twenty-five were engineers and technicians, and the remaining sixty-five were in miscellaneous trades. And one, whose name was at the top of the list, had earned that right with his life...

Alimushkin found it agreeable that all of them, some earlier, with the first advance party, some later (thousands of people gathered here not in one day and not even in one year), had already proved themselves on the job. There were cheerful oddballs and bullies, and unsociable-looking men with beards, and grave, serious ones—all with different life-stories and different characters, but their keenness, drive and industriousness and, above all, awareness—that which was always given to the builders as an example to follow—at once made them stand out in the crowd as the most suitable ones. Not at once, not immediately had the Aniva forged their characters; but they were just as he had described them at the Party Committee. Alimushkin knew that these people were tempered and tough—they wouldn't let anyone down.

The time for doubt had passed. He could rely on them—young, strong, although irrational in their outbursts, which caused him suffering, sleepless nights, and even despair about which only he knew, and such exhaustion that he felt as if he had been breaking rocks all day. That was his work. It demanded an intensity which, as

Alimushkin jokingly admitted, could make iron crack and break, but not plans. About himself he said nothing. When Gatilin observed to him once, after a difficult conversation at the Party Committee, having rightly sensed the inner turbulence behind the external calm: "«You, Pyotr Evseyevich, haven't got nerves, but Dacron veins..." Alimushkin grinned: "I wind them on my fist..."

On the eve of the river-closing operation, Alimushkin was no longer trying to convince people that it would mean cutting the construction schedules by two years and that millions of kilowatts of electrical energy and thousands of rubles would be saved. He had said it all earlier. There was no need. He praised one, swapped jokes with another, warned a third not to overdo things and asked another, "How's it going, Petya?"—and that was enough to understand how the man was feeling; and to another he confessed, "I envy you! You're only nineteen, and you're already in the front line of the river-tamers..."

He now knew what to say to whom, and he felt happy because he had not been at variance with the general opinion about a single one of them. Only now, towards evening, out of a habit developed on the Aniva, could Alimushkin review the long day and admit to himself with a trace of irony: "Everything's in order, old man, everything's in order..."

Black-haired, with big sunken eyes, the whites shining in the gloom of the unlit office, in a grey camel-hair sweater under his jacket, Alimushkin was sitting upright, cigarette in hand, in his usual place as secretary. In front of him was the long T-shaped table, designed for crowded sessions, covered with an old red cloth. Wrinkled, scattered with ash here and there and ink-stained, it seemed to be preserving the traces left by the recent presence of a large number of people. The magazines that were usually stacked on Alimush-

kin's right had been scattered about: several of them had migrated on to the top of the nearby safe; others were lying haphazardly about on the table. Strange, but this touch of disorder in the room on the eve of a big operation soothed him. It was as if he were not alone here, but had simply fallen into a reverie for a moment, had withdrawn into himself, and the voices of his comrades had receded and were not impairing his ability to think hard.

Think?

It was doubtful whether the word accurately reflected the Alimushkin's intense, concentrated state of mind. Above all, he was alone and was clearly aware of this. He was being filled with a joyful sensation of the past, the sensation of the difficult and restlessly happy years that had passed on the Aniva not like a flash, but, compressed by memory into something indivisible and complete, were being perceived by reason and feeling as a satisfaction with what had been experienced.

Generally speaking, Alimushkin was not one of the people who can only for a brief moment enjoy a success to which they have hitherto been struggling stubbornly and for a long time. He was unable at that moment to step over the success and immediately open new distances for himself, alluring horizons and prospects. It may be that he was loved and understood on the project because he well knew the value of those ordinary human joys and victories without which life would be wearisomely tedious.

The awkwardness of sincere people for some reason always seems bashful... The advance team had no landing strip or airfield at first, and when the noise of a plane was heard over the tundra, they hurried to the Rapids in the hope of picking up a bag of mail there. On one occasion it had been blown into the Aniva by the wind. Each had

decided that his own particular letters had sunk in that bag. They did not seem seriously distressed, but even so they kept looking to see if a blue envelope might not float up to the surface. Alimushkin forced himself not to mention letters and did not even show any interest. He considered that behind the indifference no one would understand how badly he had been waiting for news himself... But it happened the other way round—they got to the bottom of his secret. Korostylev began consoling him at supper. "Here, Pyotr Evseyevich, take this batch of mine. Read as much as you like and don't take it too hard. There'll be some to spare, perhaps you'll share with me..." And he winked at the other lads. They wrote to Korostylev from all over the Soviet Union—friends, acquaintances, familiar and unfamiliar friends of his friends and acquaintances, whom Korostylev was recruiting for the North with passion and with zeal, promising to knock them into a crack team. "You're promising them pie in the sky, not a life," said Alimushkin, hiding his dissatisfaction and hurt behind the reproach. "What are you going to write to them after the nails come by air?"

The lads didn't yet know what nails were if they weren't brought by road but dropped by air. The shock of impact smashes the crate and the nails fan out like machine-gun bullets. "A marvellous subject for wisecracks," commented Alimushkin. "The twentieth century, the STR, and we're crawling around on our hands and knees." "We all crawled around on our hands and knees once..." objected Vitya Snegirev challengingly, but a look from Alimushkin left him red-faced and confused.

Then the first barge-train arrived with loads and two hundred men as reinforcements. There was an incredible uproar over the Aniva. The loudspeakers were going full blast on the tugs and barges, the frenzied echoes now rebounding from the

cliffs on the river bank, now swallowed up. The advance team, very much on their own during the last few months, had splitting headaches. But the new arrivals laughed: they'd travelled the whole length of the Yenisei like that.

A powerful voice, amplified by the loudspeakers, asked from a tug:

"Hey, settlers, have you any kind of jetty here?"

Making a mouthpiece with his hands and in almost as a powerful voice, Korostylev replied:

"Go round the corner, beyond the cliff, we'll show it you there..."

From the loudspeakers: "You know what you can do, don't you!" And again there was music and the bellowing of two hundred throats. A little later, there was a pause. Then, much more gently:

"Can we tie up?"

"Yes... Is that a cow, or what?"

Basov nodded towards Korostylev:

"Take it, Vasya!"

They cast a line. Korostylev caught it in mid-air, pulled out the end and began pointedly winding it on his elbow. There was a frightened shout from the loudspeaker:

"Now then, lad, don't fool about!" Then, after an incomprehensible stream of words, threateningly this time: "Or else I'll turn back rightaway!"

The bows of the leading barge were nosing downstream: the Rapids were close by. Nikita was hurrying the boys up. They pulled in the lines and wound them round chunks of rock. Mooring went slowly, with an exchange of curses, as is usual with rivermen. Nikita went up to Alimushkin, gripped him by the shoulders and laughed:

"These cut-throats'll eat us alive!"

There was no jetty; there hadn't been time to build one. But with such a mass of people, it was not so alarming. It was no problem. "We'll unload the lot," thought Alimushkin, "tractors, vehicles,

drilling lathes—only they could have sent a few more! We've laid a log road across the quagmire—the advance team's ring-road, three hundred metres' radius. They had a job with it too—they'll never forget it as long as they live... The devil knows how much timber they cut down for it. They tied the trunks together chock-a-blok, and to go once round, they had to lay three decks smack on top of one another. It's the starting track for the builders to go further—up the slopes and on to the hill where there's going to be a town.

"What else have they got? The first house and the only one so far—a wooden cabin; their residence, with two-storey bunks. The advance party team will live there until the barrack-huts have been built. Some storehouses, a tiny bath-house, a kitchen and even an office block—a foreman's box, in fact, a covered annex to the cabin, lined with packing-case wood instead of boards. Not much, really, but it's all to be on an empty bank where there were no signs of rational or irrational human activity a couple of months back.

"And what is there to boast about? The buildings are crooked, ugly, antediluvian; but it's a base all right, it can cover the beginning of the front-line work. Old man Vantulyaku, the Nganasani who christened the town, and whom the advance team met on the second day after they'd landed here—he'd click his tongue with amazement if he could see this. 'However, a big camp. Vantulyaku can't believe it. However, no worse than on Lake Vachug!..' By autumn, when the old man had promised to look in on them again, there would already be a town, the first stone houses, light, electricity. The old man wouldn't believe it, honestly!.. He'd say it wasn't people but the *koika* that had done it all..."

Alimushkin reflectively contemplated all this

that existed and, as it were, was ceasing to exist in his imagination, and his thoughts were not in the least as exalted as those of the Party Organiser on a great construction project should be.

"Yes," he repeated to himself, "I'm happy and I shall continue to be happy at the immensity of our plans, and it's superfluous to say that I shall begrudge no effort... But I am a builder, I am a human being, and, no doubt, socially aware, carried away by my work, otherwise there would be nothing for me to do here. However, what has already been done and is passing from the hands of the builders into those of the public leaves me theoretically satisfied. But at heart, as at parting, I feel sad... It's the same here as it was in Moscow—I enjoy seeing the cement-splashed builders' scaffolding, the chaos you always get on the building-sites towards the end of the job. The tower cranes lift heavy blocks and enormous panels slowly, as if on a cobweb; lorries one after another empty out the mix, which has been in short supply almost daily for several months; the bulldozer digs its blade into the ground, irons the area flat and combs it... Over there, welding arc flashes; here, rubbish is burning on a bonfire; everywhere there are the smells of glue, linseed oil and bithumen. Everything's booming and buzzing, everything's in a hurry, the ground seems to be breathing under your feet, and the nearer the date for handing over the finished project, the more gets done—you walk about with your head bowed, you feel nostalgic for the first days or for the indescribable tension at the end of each quarter, and for some reason you don't like the way they're painting the frontage. You're at a loss, you don't know what to do with yourself.

"Of course, it wasn't at all like that here; it had begun more modestly. As for technical equipment, not counting the spades, sledgehammers and axes, we had two powerful machines, namely, Druzh-

ba petrol-saws... And God knows, we didn't get much done here, but it seemed to take ages. It's not inspiring at close quarters—no skyscrapers; but if you look down from the cliff-top, there's no getting away from it; it's already a construction project. Apart from the log-road, there's a forest road leading across a saddle in the hills to a valley. The site for the town there is convenient and sheltered from the strong winds. We didn't even touch the bushes on the inner slopes: you could shoot hazel-grouse from the window, as the boys joked. And you can hardly hear the Rapids from there... While clearing the road, they had been afraid that they wouldn't make it in time for the arrival of reinforcements, but they did the job, and no one was even surprised. What was there to be surprised at, indeed? Hard work? They were used to it. And it would never do if the cargoes and men arrive and they were unprepared to meet them. No, mates, we were expecting you; we've already driven in the stakes where you're going to use your picks!"

"What d'you suppose they'll say about us?" Alimushkin asked Basov, meaning the novices.

The other looked at him in surprise.

"They'll say we've made a muddle and now they've got to sort it out."

"You're a cynic, Nikita Leontievich. You've got nothing elevated about you."

"No, Alimushkin," Nikita was clearly in a light-hearted mood and could not take anything seriously. "They'll say this is a legend; they'll ask where the queue is for the monuments we're going to leave to posterity... But now let them have a bite to eat and go to the baths! You can bet they've got eye for nothing but our canteen right now..."

"All right, then! If they ask, even if only one of them does, I'll say they should queue up behind you..."

"We need concrete for the base... That means," broke in Basov, "that tomorrow we start digging the foundation pit! Let the first monument be the concrete-mixing plant."

"You're in a hurry..." Alimushkin shook his head doubtfully. "Tomorrow, eh? We've got to unload the barges first. Don't forget, the turnover of the cargo fleet depends on you and me most of all!"

"It depends on them!" Basov nodded towards the newcomers. "And on the Aniva too. If the water falls, we'll be stranded... But you're right, Party Organiser, there isn't time to cool off." And Basov clapped his hands, summoning the new arrivals, who were milling about uncertainly on one side. "Attention, comrades!"

Shifting their weight from one foot to the other, smiling vaguely at him (who was this?), they came nearer. The buzz of voices died down.

"I," said Basov, "am the chief of the right bank... Congratulations on your arrival at the Aniva! I hope you had a good trip! And now," he nodded, then wiped the smile off his face, "the ceremonial part is over. I will announce further procedure: one hour for dinner and settling in. Please split up into teams and appoint your leaders. Team leaders should come to me with their lists. After dinner—working clothes; all to unload the barges. Payment by agreement."

"Don't you approve of such an introduction?" Basov asked after they had left. "Are you going to say I forgot to make a speech? Saying that we're not just building a hydroelectric station, we're building communism?"

"Never mind, we'll see. I'm already used to your main point: we must build with our hands, not our tongues."

"And our heads, Alimushkin, our heads!" Basov raised his finger instructively.

"I know, I've heard!" said Alimushkin with a

dismissive gesture, and it cost him an effort not to say that the tongue is nearer to the head than the hands. But it would have been a pointless argument.

"Then, Pyotr,"—Basov had softened a little; Alimushkin thought he could hear an apologetic note in his voice—"the meeting is up to you. Only in the evening, after they've unloaded. It's the barges, the barges that'll be our nightmare!"

Alimushkin's restrained "It's all right" as the echo of a long-standing dispute was well understood by both, especially Basov, who rushed at things bull-headed, didn't let the Party Organiser talk to people, get to know them, question them about the journey and tell how the advance team had become acclimatised to the Rapids. Would it really have been any the worse if Alimushkin had given a talk first, explaining the task and warning of possible snags, to hear which is doubly unpleasant when you are putting people on overtime? Would they work with less guts once they had understood his point? And Alimushkin, philosophically reasoning that Nikita's wrongness would in one way or another make itself felt during the work, however much he tried, did not notice that after Basov's "announcement" the new-arrivals were dismayed. They all worked well.

Why? Was Basov right after all? Alimushkin was certain that he had given in to Basov. Perhaps of necessity, perhaps to avoid holding up the barges, but he had given in. He wanted the lads from their very first step on the Aniva territory to live in a new way; he was even intending to conduct their ceremonial induction as Barakhsanites, but instead of this tradition, another had been born: it had become customary to get to know the novices during the course of the work.

In each train of four or five barges, one was carrying men. The parties who had arrived, whether at night or in the daytime, almost as soon

as they had placed their luggage and had arranged their places, began unloading their train. Moreover, even while approaching Barakhsan, the "third" train already knew how the first and second had worked to unload the barges; they had evidently found out from the rivermen and all tried to beat the earlier records. Wasn't that a tradition too?

And so Alimushkin began to pay more attention to Basov, having made it a rule to try and understand the man before quarrelling with him.

A Communist, a Doctor, a pupil of Malyshev's, finally, chief of the right bank...

He had achieved much that a man of his age and position could only dream of. Hence, Alimushkin believed, Basov's sense of purpose. He did not dissipate himself over trivialities. He considered the ability to do a job as paramount in estimating a man's potential. Somewhat hot-tempered, but indefatigable in his search for the best answers. As he loved to say himself, the best variant is the one that hasn't been found!

He was both exacting and trusting. He hit it off well with people. Perhaps it would be more correct to say that others found it easy to get on with him, to find a common language with him. And he was no big-head. Basov highly appreciated being chosen by Malyshev, who had recommended him for Barakhsan, and, on the quiet, he was proud of the old man's faith in him.

With his inclination for generalised thinking, there was hidden in him a man of great future promise. Aware of this, Alimushkin once asked him outright: "Haven't you made a mistake, taking up building instead of science?" "Perhaps!" snapped the other offendedly. "If I'm no use to anyone here..." You see, even the question offended him! And he probably did right to take it like that.

There was nothing strange about that. It was, however, strange that Alimushkin himself was in

the sort of position and on the kind of relations with all that gave him no right to take personal offence. But to admit this meant either to agree to his own exclusiveness, which was distasteful to him, or to adopt a standard of conduct that corresponded to people's ideas of him. To them, he was first and foremost the Party Organiser. He was expected to show personal impartiality to all and, at the same time, a partiality that was immeasurably greater than that which he could have allowed himself simply as a person, not burdened with a sense of Party responsibility both for the successful outcome to the project and for the correct, morally pure mutual relations of the builders in the collective. He had to be as fair to all as was demanded from him, a Communist, by Party ethics and conscience.

At moments of calm reflection, all this seemed clear and straightforward, but in fact it became the heavy burden of making decisions on which production schedules and human destinies alike depended, and some of the decisions, moreover, could not be corrected, whether right or wrong.

When Alimushkin asked him whether he had made the right choice for himself by coming to the Aniva, Basov's offended reaction was understandable and, in general, excusable at that stage of their relationship. But it was not only Basov who was beside Alimushkin. Dozens of men used to approach him, and each called for different treatment. And who would ask Alimushkin if he mightn't have made a mistake when he gave his consent for Viktor Snegirev to take part in the expedition?

Snegirev, a Muscovite, and a Komsomol member, was the youngest of the advance team. The boys began jokingly to call him the "Son of the advance team", but Anna Odarchenko corrected them with a gentle smile—"baby". She thought that Snegirev couldn't hear her, but he

walked straight into the tent at that moment and flared up on hearing what she said. Despite the stubborn fold of the deliberately knitted brows, there was always something gentle, almost child-like in his face, and so it reflected the slightest change of feeling or mood, even if he was trying to look independent and impassive. When he came in, the wags at once changed the subject, since it had already been noted that Snegirev took people's jokes about him very badly. But he said nothing, and merely coughed tactfully into his fist.

Viktor had graduated from a signals school, was a skilled radio operator and had a driving licence. Before the Aniva, he had worked as senior operator at the switchboard of a confectionary works. There were a hundred and eighty girls in the organisation, he was apparently the only young man among them and they, of couse, gleefully elected him YCL Organiser. How did he get on with them? He got on with them fine. Except that one day, after the announcement of a YCL call-up for the Siberian building projects, someone sent a note up to Viktor on the platform: "What are you doing, YCL Organiser, egging on others and waving travel vouchers at them? What about yourself?"

He went to the District Committee and they told him he was needed where he was... But the boy's self-respect had been stung and there was no holding him back now. He got as far as the YCL Central Committee where, as it happened, the Aniva advance team was being formed, and he found Basov. Take me! Basov looked at Alimushkin, who looked at Basov, and Snegirev said offendedly: "I know you're collecting up the tougher grown-ups, but my advantage is that I'm of YCL age!" It was true, but it wasn't the age that did it, it was his nerve! They had to take him. So he was careful not to accept indulgences of any kind on the Aniva.

His attitude to Anya was chivalrous. He'd stick out his lips and glare like a wolf with his head down, ready to spring on the offender if he allowed himself the slightest hint of vulgarity in Anya's presence. He did not yet understand that a slight rudeness among the lads was an affectation, each of them wanted to champion Anya, but she was a bright girl—she treated them in exactly the same way, but she accepted Viktor Snegirev's protection. After this, he went about walking on air.

Looking at Snegirev, Alimushkin sometimes wondered what he would be like in a few years' time... "Here we are," he thought, "we'll put up a dam, we'll build a city, we'll turn an idea into something tangible. It'll be possible to touch every stone with your hand. But what about the human being?"

He once got talking to Nikita about this; after all, Basov regarded the dam as his immediate task, but, quite surprisingly for Alimushkin, he admitted that Pyotr Evseyevich's task was much more complicated; it was hard to put up the building of a human spirit. "But don't you find," said Alimushkin, joyfully agreeing with him, "that the dialectics is in the very fact that everything we create remains on earth as a testimony to the poverty or perfection of the spirit? Therefore we have the same tasks in common..." This was a favourite thought of his, and, pleased that Basov had rightly understood him, Alimushkin felt even more respect for him, aware of him as an ally and comrade-in-arms in the common cause.

Basov found occasion and time to observe how the young builders were organising themselves and settling down in the North. Many people were arriving and it was hard to place them in so many important and urgent jobs without scenes and swearing. However, everything went fine without any "incidents". The foresight of one man would

not have saved the situation, but it was the old hands of the advance team who came to the rescue. They considered themselves as complete masters of the situation, and even experienced builders from the mainland were wrong, taking them, while they were still just section-leaders or team-leaders, for foremen and fully qualified professionals. Without bothering Basov and Alimushkin or demanding help, they assigned the new arrivals to their work places, familiarised them with the set-up and made sure they had everything they needed, from accommodation and food to tools and overalls. "Our boys have developed a taste for independence ... noticed?" said Basov with pride to Alimushkin, who confirmed it. Indeed, the boys with pleasure and, most important of all, with intelligence, took on the complex and intensive work which calls for training, experience and mental resourcefulness, although it is boringly termed "the organisation of labour". Some points had to be suggested to them or taught, but by midsummer it was already clear that the Barakhsanites were going to cope with the season's programme. They put up log cabins and barrack huts, laid the foundations of the hostels, and a cafeteria and made the roads. True, there were not enough materials being brought up the big river, but they found an answer to this too; they stockpiled them temporarily on the banks of the Aniva estuary so as to transport them by lorry to the Rapids over the ice-crusted snow.

Life in the North depressed people mainly because of its daily tedium and monotony; but it would be wrong to say that the events of one day, like two drops of water, repeated those of the one before. Happy and boring, peaceful and intensely worrying, ordinary days were ordinary days so that the festivals would make a contrast and would long be remembered by all. And it took not a little stamina and courage, under the conditions of the

North, not to squander one's spiritual forces, not to overdo it at work, not to lose sight of the goal which, once achieved, would stay there as a signpost on the difficult journey. People live and work, sometimes not even thinking about this, perhaps because lofty aims are rarely achieved by the efforts of individuals or loners; the greater the efforts of each builder, the weightier are the common achievements.

Alimushkin regarded the conception and fulfilment of new ideas as a social and public phenomenon. He vividly compared it with the process of crystallization, but for this the solution must be super-saturated—in other words, the fulfilment of any idea should be not simply a social demand, but a necessity.

The Aniva, at first glance, did not demand superhuman creative efforts from the builders. All the uniqueness of the power station was conditioned not by fundamentally new engineering or design solutions or by the difficulty of carrying them out, but by whether or not the Barakhsanites, applying the experience accumulated before them by others under different conditions, would prove it possible to develop hydroelectric power in the Arctic tundra, and specifically in the permafrost zone. A very explicit task, it would seem. But Basov often managed to quarrel about it with Alimushkin—need they limit themselves to this alone? Alimushkin poured cold water on Basov's fervour and stood firmly for sticking to the plan and the schedules—no deviations whatever! And Basov would be angry:

"I'm bored here, Alimushkin, please understand me! It's turning out to be just any old run-of-the-mill project!"

"Listen, we're not a test range and we're not a lab!" said Alimushkin outraged.

"And why not?" said Basov with a smile. "Is it so indecent, then—to experiment?"

They even had words at the Party Committee meeting. Basov, you see, was against standard solutions, against limited thinking. He should have said what he thought: Alimushkin was a stick-in-the-mud; he played it too safe and then ... limitations... "So you may blackname anyone you like," fumed Alimushkin. "There'll be nothing to argue against, because it's impossible without limitations, and they are different with different people...". Alimushkin, amongst other things, did not forget to remind Basov out of pique that the number of rationalizers on the project was growing. Recently, a rig had been patented for drilling frozen ground to take the supports of buildings and electric transmission lines. The effect of introducing rationalization suggestions was already approaching the million rubles mark. It wouldn't do, he thought, for Basov to say that, in the hunt for indicators, we were badly oversimplifying the concept of technical progress. We were not simplifying, but perfecting, developing more widely, because no one has given us the right to ignore the mass element. And without the mass element, without quantity, what will become of revolutionary quality? Otherwise, anyone might think that the Party Organiser was deliberately holding the project back from its leap across the Aniva.

"You're the chief engineer," said Alimushkin. "How d'you yourself understand the task specifically?"

"I understand it simply and correctly!" came the arrogant reply. "A new solution must be found in the main direction: tunnels, foundation pits, the dam..."

"There's something I haven't grasped," said Gavrila Silin, the chief mechanic, "but what are you intending to do about the Aniva?"

"Build a dam across it, of course," Basov shrugged his shoulders.

"Is that true?" laughed the other. "But how?"

"How should I know how? Drive a good wedge into its gizzard, that'd be how..."

The members of the Party Committee advised him to do some hard thinking.

But he was crafty! He kept his mouth shut but, apparently, already knew how... He waited for the first day of good weather, took the helicopter and flew to the Nganasani. And, what was untypical of him, he did not invite anyone to go with him, as if he had some kind of personal interest there...

It was no longer a secret why he had flown there and what he had been doing. He had been questioning the old men about how the Aniva behaved in spate, when the ice moved on Lake Vachug, what signs there were of the loose ice, and why the level fell, and how far...

The Nganasani were considerate and well-meaning people. They showed him now above the knee, now lower—but just try compiling a hydrological report out of such data! He found a shrewd one who advised Nikita Basov to go to the school; the geography teacher knew everything for a hundred years back and a hundred years into the future. For the last thirty years he had been running a young nature-lovers' group in the school and had preserved notebooks containing observations of the Aniva—date, day, hour, water-level so-and-so, duration so-and-so, rose by so much in 24 hours, etc...

"What did you do this for?" asked Basov with interest.

"Well..." the teacher hesitated. "Say we knew it would be needed eventually?.. Who knew anything about it?" the teacher grinned, and carried on without embarrassment this time. "We weren't going to sit in the dark forever! Clearly, we had faith in it. And besides, it was useful for the children..."

For this work, Basov had the school presented with a new set of hydrometeorological equipment.

It was approved of now, but at the time they had grumbled at him: "Found yourself a protégé, have you? Spendthrift!"

But the "spendthrift" insisted on calling an extended Party Committee meeting—again to do with the STR. Only this time he proposed to discuss not a problem in general, but a particular one or, as he himself noted in parenthesis, a revolutionary idea. They assembled reluctantly—at least, so it seemed to Alimushkin. He was displeased that Basov had not considered it necessary to discuss the gist of his idea before the session, and was afraid of a blunder. Basov would not be forgiven for it.

Basov's speech began ominously. It was more like a lecture on hydraulic engineering, and for a specialist such an approach is always somewhat insulting. You didn't build a dam simply by piling up any rocks you could lay your hands on. It must grow into the bed, fuse with the monolith; and for this purpose, the course of the river was diverted or the foundation pit was barred off with a cofferdam in which they would then spend a year, two years or even more clearing the bed of sedimentary deposits and going down to firm bedrock. The surface on which the concrete foundations of the dam would lie was levelled off and polished mirror-smooth so that there was not a crack in it, not a speck of dirt. After that, the "cap" was filled with ultra-strong hydraulic concrete, and on to this, strictly according to regulations, that is in a definite sequence, the blocks were laid, the actual body of the dam. To put it crudely, the entire scope of the work was divided into two categories: useful (the dam), and useless, compulsory (the side channel, the cofferdams). Frequently, diverting the river was more costly than building the dam. As on the Aniva, for example; it was planned to drive two tunnels: a small one which would serve for overspill and the

regulation of the reservoir level, and a big one through which the Aniva would have to be diverted during work in the pit. Easier said than done! It would be half a kilometre through the rock, with a cross section of ten by fifteen metres... The driving of the small tunnel was already nearly finished, but they were only just about to start work on the big one.

And now, like a bolt from the blue, Basov's words:

"I propose, comrades, that we refrain entirely from driving the big tunnel. We can proceed to dam the Aniva without it, we'll manage with the little one only..."

For some three minutes, there was a silence in the hall as if people had lost the power of speech. Bewilderment was written on all faces. Basov was enjoying himself. Smiling, slowly rubbing the bridge of his nose, he waited for questions; but seeing that the pause was dragging on, decided to amuse himself a little more.

"So," he said, "if there are no objections, shall we consider the proposition accepted?"

The whole hall gasped, and then it started... Some were outraged, some asked questions, some shouted something incomprehensible—all wanted explanations; but Basov looked at them imperturbably and bided his time. When the storm subsided, he commented acidly, with Alimushkin in mind:

"It's always like that! When it comes to a revolutionary start, you all turn against me! How am I to achieve a revolution with you?"

Immediately forgiving him this, perhaps not very justified, pin-prick, Alimushkin listened eagerly to the plan, conceived, as he understood, and thought over by Basov down to the last detail. The idea was a simple one, and this obvious simplicity made Alimushkin wonder what predominated in Basov's version: boldness or originality? Or both together? How, he wanted to understand,

in what way, does thought select from many verified and confirmed decisions its own, new, untried one? The laws of nature are immutable, water easily runs down to the lowest part of the bed if it is on a slope. But what makes a human being seek another course for his thought? No doubt this calls for talent and for daring. But also for the power of scientific vision! But! It is only enough to say "but"—and at once dozens of other causes and conditions facilitating the birth of the new idea suggest themselves, and something, evidently, will slip away not yet accessible to the understanding...

Basov had based his calculations on a low flow-rate in the Aniva during the autumn-winter period, and he quoted the figures. According to them, there would be plenty of room for the winter Aniva in the small tunnel. From September to May—eight, nearly nine months—the foundation pit would be dry, a period of time fully adequate for the foundations of the dam to be laid. In spring, the pressure would rise, there would be several times the quantity of water and the unfinished dam would be unavoidably flooded but... Again that "but"!

The iron rule was that dams are built without the water being permitted to flow over them. Basov was allowing and insisting on the overflow, but was taking into consideration the strictly cyclic nature of the Aniva's rise and fall. Having shed its spring waters in summer, the Aniva would return to normal again. And next September the level would be low once more. It was understandable that to continue concreting, it would be necessary to knock away a small crest from the body of the dam. However, the final advantages of his version meant halving the time for construction and cutting outlays by half. In other words, for the time and the money allocated for one dam, it would be theoretically possible to build two.

Eye-catching! But what sharp people! Instead of being delighted they demanded that the weaknesses of the new version be explained to them too...

"What d'you want?" laughed Basov. "Me to refute myself? Spare me that..."

And then in earnest:

"The main weaknesses are in any possible lack of coordination. There are three factors. First: it is essential to choose the data of damming with extreme accuracy. But," he qualified, "I would ask you to see accuracy not as a weakness of the project, but as a condition for the successful closing of the river. The fact is that the closure channel is narrow, the speed of the water is high. To hold the thrust, twenty- or twenty-five-ton blocks will hardly be enough. We have no way of throwing in heavy blocks, there isn't the equipment. The lowest flood-level was established as occurring at the beginning of the third decade of September—the data from thirty years of observations testify to this... (So that's why he flew to Lake Vachug!) Secondly, will our cardinal change in the project be authorised... (And here, venomously derisive: 'That will be decided by the bullfight!..') Thirdly, if our proposal is accepted, there will be new and fairly serious hang-ups with the early delivery of the main equipment expected only in three or four years' time.... And the last thing which is within our power—we ought to speed up the building of the dike. The Aniva reservoir will grow with the dam. It will be a big sea" —he burst out laughing—"but the sea doesn't like making jokes!"

After the Party Committee meeting, which approved Basov's idea, Vasya Korostylev commented, sadly doubtful:

"Everything's in our hands, but the hands belong to the supporting enterprises."

"You're wrong to think that," objected Alimush-

kin. "People have consciences!.. The Chief Directorate is supporting us, I'm sure. For an initiative like that, Gatilin will stand like a mountain too; only let him work it out in his own time, without being rushed, at the hang of it... As for the supporting people, we'll invite them to compete, we'll sign an agreement, we'll ask their people to come over and see for themselves. I don't believe it, it's not possible that they won't understand. It's such a big thing! And they'll understand—and that means they'll help."

They went back to their homes after midnight. Basov, worn out, wilting after the stormy discussion, limply offered Alimushkin his hand. The other held it in his for a time and asked:

"What are you being so miserable about? They'll go over the project, they'll give it the okay, then you can tear your hair; but it's early yet."

Basov sighed with restraint.

"That's not what I'm worried about, Pyotr..."

"What, then?"

"Oh, nothing..."

"Come on, now..."

"If you'd only give me some leave, Alimushkin! I'd go to my home in the country, I'd build a bridge there, otherwise there's no getting to the district centre in high water. It's all right for the men on the tractors, they can drive round, but..."

"But the women and girls have to wade across it?"

"Oh no..." Basov frowned. "It's just that I haven't seen my mother for a long time..." And he was silent.

So that was it! And Alimushkin had thought that Basov was in the seventh heaven with joy... Oh, if only he really could be sent home with a team. They'd put up such a bridge there! But he wasn't free to act. And that bridge was maybe tied not to the district centre but to the umbilical cord, but

we never have time, we don't think about such things...

This reproach, involuntarily and unexpectedly addressed to himself, confused Alimushkin somewhat. Perhaps for the first time he thought that people, even tough ones like, say, Basov, also needed protection and consolation. But to think so was strange and unfamiliar. His thoughts were somehow at variance with the ideas generally accepted on the Aniva about the energetic chief engineer.

No one doubted that with his persistence, Basov would always stand firm. For the cause, decided Alimushkin, but for himself, hardly... The inner gentleness and softness that he had momentarily glimpsed that evening now seemed too defenceless and modest.

In time, as he felt more and more of an urge for understanding and for closer relationships with different kinds of people, and submitting with pleasure to that demand and even necessity (for Alimushkin saw this as one of the invariable obligations of a communist and even more so of a Party secretary), he discovered with joyful astonishment that the builders were likewise drawn to him. What must he be like so that the attraction should never weaken?

"I'm not young any more," thought Alimushkin, taking into consideration, as it were, everything that he had done and completed so far and everything that still lay in store for him on the project, "but why do I sometimes feel distracted at the many functionaries that keep guard on someone else's thought like watchdogs? If this is cowardice, then, like the activity of all time-servers, like the obtuseness of triumphant ignorance, it harbours a serious danger now threatening the cause of our scientific and technological revolution. Devoid of a calling, honour and conscience, attached only to their job and not the

cause—such functionaries are not easily identified. They don't look alike and have different educational inhibitions, different positions and different jobs, but essentially they are the same. These people who, to put it bluntly, can't do what's wanted themselves and won't let others do it, are the dogs in the manger. God help us if anyone turns out better than they are—they'll persecute you at the first opportunity. And I know why I'm thinking about this. Formerly, I had no need to go out of the accustomed circle: project—house; foreman—workers, plan—be a good sort and get it finished on schedule... Formerly, I wasn't absolutely passive, but I didn't touch tasks of major state importance and I carried a different responsibility. Yes, I had to show initiative, but only on run-of-the-mill assignments, only within the limits of the monthly or quarterly production quota—it was like a law. Prospects associated with the interests of the masses, were restricted for me; not only thought but vision also penetrated into those prospects, as through narrow slit, with difficulty, and even then no further than the monthly figures. When did I have time to see and think about the barriers on the road to progress that have risen up before us here, even if only in connection with Basov's project?.. No, I'm not repentant, I think with horror of the destructive power of bad habits, about the most terrible of them, complacency, lack of demands on oneself and others, routine thinking, in the final analysis!.. The plan is the plan, but one must put one's soul into the work, one must burn, fight for the just cause with determination and to the end—that, perhaps, is the creativeness which the Aniva is stimulating. And Nikita is absolutely right; here is an opportunity to avoid the stereotyped approach to human problems and the problems of technical equipment, of production. There must be no shirking here..."

Outstanding among the other items in Alimushkin's plans for that day, the one before the closing of the river, was a chat with Odarchenko and with the excavator driver, Roman Gittaulin. At the Party Committee meeting, they had supported the proposal to carry out the symbolic taming of the Aniva. Gittaulin was invited to dump the first rock inscribed "Submit, Aniva!" and Alimushkin, knowing his almost painful shyness, had asked Anna Odarchenko to talk it over with him first, for Anna's opinion could prove more important to Roman than Alimushkin's many arguments.

Hearing footsteps echoing in the office building corridor, Alimushkin hurried out under the impression that it was Gittaulin.

Gittaulin's mate, Borodulin, was waddling along the corridor, hat in hand, in a wide-open sheepskin coat. They exchanged greetings.

"Did you want to see me?" asked Alimushkin.

Borodulin hesitated.

"Well," he said, "I'm looking for someone..."

"You won't find anyone here, they're all at headquarters."

Borodulin suddenly looked sharply at Alimushkin from under his eyebrows and evidently did not say quite what was in his mind.

"How is it with you—everything all right?"

Alimushkin laughed.

"The office's empty, doesn't that tell you anything? Have you seen Gittaulin?"

"No," sighed Borodulin after a pause. "You have nothing to tell me?"

Alimushkin knew what he was getting at. He frowned, as if suppressing an involuntary pity for the man and, enunciating his words clearly, replied:

"No, I have nothing to say... Think yourself about what next. The men have shown no confidence in you..."

"What about Basov? You don't know, do you?"

asked Borodulin in a sinking voice.

"Basov? Have a word with him." He shrugged his shoulders. "But I don't think it'll help. Put yourself in his place."

It was rare for Alimushkin not to feel the slightest desire to help someone or at least give him some practical advice. He had already hinted to Borodulin that it wouldn't be a good idea to meet Basov, but he was not altogether sure of this. Borodulin would now be understood rather by Gatilin as a brother in misfortune—but to say so would be tantamount to deriding the two of them. Alimushkin intentionally drew out the pause, indicating that any further conversation would be pointless. The other saw the point. He pulled down his hat resignedly. He buttoned up his coat.

"Very well," he sighed reproachfully, "thanks for that much, at least. I shan't bother you any more..."

The incident with Borodulin had an unpleasant effect on Alimushkin. The excavator-driver, well-known all over the project, had not been accepted for the special team during the river-closing ceremony. Who was to blame? It had been decided by more than one vote. The men had assembled in sectors and teams, had argued till they were hoarse, had tried to prove who was better and more deserving. For a basis, they took the attitude to work, and sometimes tenths of a per cent decided the outcome of the dispute; in this case, the man had been ahead of all: the highest output figures, bonuses regularly, formal congratulations...

Alimushkin personally attended the meeting of the machine operators. Rough diamonds, straightforward, knew their worth, never at a loss for words. They criticised some of their own men, others were laughed at, but finally they put up their hands and voted. Borodulin came out to the

presidium table—massive shoulders, head like a cannonball; but there was an awkward hush in Silin's office. Alimushkin was astonished. Why the strange pause? He asked who was proposing him? Silence. Even his mates, who always rescue their senior, kept mum.

Someone shouted from the back rows:

"He's a skinflint. Let him propose himself!"

"Skinflint yourself!" Borodulin jerked his shoulder, as if shaking off the stigma. "I don't gamble on the lottery, I work. With my own two hands!"

"With grab-claws!"

"I didn't push myself on to you—you fixed it yourselves," he grinned, not admitting his fault. "This to the winner, that to the winner... A flag and all the rest... Or does someone question my output figures? You name me the targets I didn't fulfill!"

"Why don't they like him?" Alimushkin asked Silin in a whisper.

"They like him..." jeered Silin in a drawl. "And how!"

All the same, Alimushkin invited first one to speak, then another, and loosened their tongues in this way. It was true, they said that Borodulin was a grab-all; he was as brash as a ringleader, and he wouldn't loose a kopek... There was no harm in that. Our chaps would never give away their own to someone, but you live on people all the same, so why drive them too hard?"

"What d'you mean, drive them too hard?" asked Alimushkin.

"Why!" Up got grader-operator Strumilin. "He wrenches the gears, and Gittaulin has to re-adjust after him." And he explained: "He's driven his mate too hard, Romka Gittaulin... He's a quiet Tatar, he never says anything and Borodulin's been making use of it... Borodulin chucks the machine about, but Romka's gentle with it. One makes the excavator scream and it bends over

backwards, but with Romka its like a beetle, buzz-buzz, as if it was singing. But a machine isn't a beast, it's a living thing too, and if Borodulin's excavator could speak, it would tell him to go and ... himself..."

The men laughed approvingly.

"In a word," summed up Strumilin, "the said comrade is undeserving of our comradely respect."

Borodulin snarled and threw his letter of resignation down on the desk. Silin signed it. It may be that Silin was in a hurry, but now Alimushkin replied correctly to him: it was not Silin, but the men who had rejected him, and it was to the men that he must talk!

...There was an unexpected phone-call from the airport, as the Barakhsanites importantly called their landing-strip. The man on duty, evidently unable to find anyone else, had complained to Alimushkin: there was a helicopter coming in, and there was no one to bring the mail from the post office...

"What are you bothering me with such trivialities for?" said Alimushkin furiously. "Can't you decide for yourself? Incidentally, what helicopter's coming in such bad weather?"

"The devil knows, it's not flying weather now, either."

"Is it a big bird?" Alimushkin hazarded.

"A big bird—that's why I'm ringing! A reporter from the capital. Igarka said it was a dragon, not a woman. 'Better get the cage ready,' they said... You can imagine, if they allowed her an emergency flight..."

Alimushkin grinned.

"Good... I'll ask Odarchenko here." Anna had just come into the office at that moment and had been listening to the conversation with a vague smile. "She'll take the mail for you, and she'll meet the visitor... She'll show her Barakhsan and

the Rapids, and she'll reserve a room in the hotel..." And, putting down the receiver, he asked Anna, "Well, will you meet her?"

"Of course." She shrugged her shoulders. "If it's got to be done, it's got to be done."

"What about Gittaulin?"

"He agrees. He'll come and tell you so."

"Good..."

Alimushkin found Odarchenko the easiest of all to work with. She had a remarkable knack of being there just when her help was needed, and this, of course, was not pure chance. Unable to express how much he valued her help, Alimushkin spoke further as if offering Anya every opportunity to act independently, only giving her one pointer, and that in jest:

"Be specially careful not to put the wind up the press with our difficulties. Say rightaway that ours is the usual Arctic set-up, the usual people, no superexotics. We don't go around arm-in-arm with bears. Otherwise they'll give us such a write-up that we'll be fighting off the youngsters..."

He was, of course, joking.

The north, of course, is no holiday resort. And so many had come out there—not dozens, not hundreds, but thousands of beardless heroes who had not taken the trouble to acquire even a touch for hardening, but thought they were going to conquer and astound the world just like that!.. No one was keeping them there, no one was pushing them; they flew away like birds of passage. Ask one of them in half a year's time and he wouldn't even remember the name of the Aniva...

If only Alimushkin had known whom he was intending to teach through Anya!..

Basov dropped in for a moment, did not take his coat off and gulped down half a glass of water. "Everything under control?"

"Absolutely."

"Gittaulin?"

"Yes."

"I thought so... Well, so long!"

"So long!.. "

In the doorway, that devil, from whom nothing could be kept secret, stopped and mentioned casually:

"Have you given an interview to Moscow yet?"

"Later. I'm waiting till after we've blocked the river."

"Shrewd of you. Aren't you boasting about the greetings from your godfather?"

"From whom?"

"Malyshev, as I understand it."

"Nikita!.." Alimushkin felt as if something had snapped inside him. He hurried over to Basov, who was already through the doorway and still laughing impudently:

"I didn't know you didn't know, or I'd have had you on! But I ordered that the extraordinary and plenipotentiary representative of Academician Malyshev—to some people, Daria Tikhonovna, and to others (he changed his voice) simply Dasha the Bee ... has immediately reported to you! Wait, Alimushkin!" he shouted, his boots already clumping down the stairs, and suddenly he swore: "Blast, I said you were at home..."

Alimushkin raced home at full pelt.

In vain. Dasha wasn't there. Perhaps she was at Anya's or in the hotel. He rang up—no. Where had Basov seen her and where had Anya disappeared to?.. With some difficulty, he pestered the telephone operators—but wherever they tried, Basov's trail was already cold. Alimushkin nevertheless caught up with him at the concrete works.

"Where did you see her?"

"She was communing with the Rapids," said Nikita reassuringly. "She's with Anya, so don't get upset. I said that they should drive over to the restaurant for supper, but to go to you and no one

law, at least, was immutable.

"And so," countered Malyshev, "you, young man, insist on a second analysis?"

The reply was impolite, almost disrespectful, to say the least.

"I'm not insisting, I'm clear about it." He shrugged his shoulders. "You are the one who should be insisting, but if that is inconvenient or of no interest to you..." he shuffled his feet awkwardly and, without finishing, sat down.

Conscious of the slightly mocking, curious eyes of the students, Malyshev felt the smell of battle. The audience was dying for a fight, uncertain of victory, but hoping for one, and so he took up the challenge.

"Please come up to the blackboard!" he invited with a sweeping gesture.

Basov hesitated at first, but then came out, textbook in hand—a detail, it must be frankly said, clearly untypical of a second-year man; however this obviousness also demanded examination...

In the upper corner of the board, Basov wrote out Malyshev's coefficient, the bone of contention. Then, with rapid logical consistency, he chalked up the condition of durability at which Malyshev's coefficient should be one and a half times higher than the sum of all the supplementary coefficients that appeared later, together with the new methods of studying the destructive effects of the dam's environment. Looking at the chain of figures and signs on the board, Malyshev easily guessed Basov's line of argument. At least the boy had behaved decently, giving him in advance the benefit of a unit and a half and later, by simple addition, explaining what was, in fact, the sum of the additional magnitudes... Taken by themselves and separately, they were not great—from tenth to hundredths—but Malyshev, with the long-forgotten emotions of the examinee, watched as

Basov opened the textbook now at one page, now at another, copying out more and more numbers, and when he finally totalled them up, the correction coefficient was in excess of the original, and Basov ruthlessly crossed it out. The magnitude of excess was, as Malyshev had presumed, insignificant; in effect, it could even be ignored, since practice takes into consideration each time only the specific characteristics of the environment; but the principle was important here and Malyshev asked:

"So it's checkmate, then?"

"Your move," smiled Basov, returning to his place.

Malyshev fully appreciated his correctness and went up to him.

"Thank you for the lesson, colleague. Let's introduce ourselves..."

"Basov, Nikita."

"And your patronymic?"

"Leontievich..."

"Nikita Leontievich," repeated Malyshev, as if committing it to memory. "I'm now ready to give you top marks for the course. Please don't forget the progress report. We shall have to write the correction to the estimates jointly. You," he turned to the audience that was looking distractedly and delightedly at him and their comrade by turns, "you, colleagues, like me, have been given an object lesson in the creative interpretation of material." He laughed. "Don't forget to correct your lecture-notes. I shall ask each candidate about the Malyshev-Basov formula at the exam!"

On Malyshev's insistence, the department granted Basov a personal study plan, and at the beginning of the fourth year, as an exception, the subject of Basov's thesis was adopted and confirmed by the academic council.

Basov himself attached no importance whatever to this on the second course.

At institute, he fell for maths, and fell so seriously that he nearly transferred from hydroengineering to engineering mathematics. This was forestalled by his association with Malyshev who once suggested that Basov should think over a way of perfecting the methods of statistical estimates for concrete high-thrust dams. By the existing methods, rather crude tolerances were being applied which naturally led to the overconsumption of materials and an increase in the volume and time of the construction work.

"We need a dynamic method," suggested Malyshev. "Try and find an algorithm."

Very seldom is a calculation, if successful, immediately taken up by the economy. In principle, the solution must be purely mathematical, and Basov threw himself into the search with enthusiasm, not supposing at the time that the work would take years. But he had already been calculating the durability of the Aniva dam by his own method. In acknowledging the congratulations for this, Basov was not seduced by this first success. And now it was turning out to be still too far from the concrete estimate to the complete and harmonious system at which he was aiming. The sought-for algorithm looked clumsy and fragile, the traditional dependents were interfering, like shackles on his legs, they were weighing down the solution, depriving it of ease and elegance. The formulae he had so far found were not emancipating but, having ordered the thought, were only hampering its movement. On arriving at this unconsoling conclusion, Basov confessed to Malyshev:

"Something's missing for the solution. I'm trying for simplicity, and I can't get it. It slips through my fingers like water..."

"It's the lack of practical experience," summed up Malyshev. "You can leave it as it is or you can give it up... I'm not trying you out, think it over

and decide for yourself..."

Immediately after obtaining his institute diploma, Basov submitted a candidate's thesis on a subject associated with the prospects of using the hydroelectric power resources of the Far North. No one had any doubts whatever that Basov would be successful: he was, after all, backed by Malyshev, and his friends readily prophesied a place for Basov in the department... No less readily did Nikita make light of their prophecies, but a scene with his wife after defending his thesis gave him cause for some serious thinking.

"I advise you," declared Elena without hesitation, as about something long decided, "to get away from Malyshev."

"What? How d'you mean?" At first, he did not even understand her.

She smiled.

"If they said to you on the street, 'Get out of the way, young man,' you would also ask 'What d'you mean'? I don't mean you should have a final break with him—what's the point?.. But still..."

He looked at her wide-eyed and could not believe that Elena could think and talk like that about Malyshev. What she had just said seemed incredible. But she was not joking. And as soon as this registered on him, instead of stopping Elena, interrupting her in mid-word with a shout, putting her to shame, Basov finally, distraught, said helplessly:

"Go on, go on..."

Encouraged, Elena went on trying to convince ıim, and although her words went in one ear and ɔut the other, Basov suddenly felt what he had ;uspected before but had not yet fully realised: he ıad never known or understood Elena... Perhaps ıe did not understand women and their feminine ɔgic at all! But even this presupposition did not lter the essence of it. For some reason he

remembered that his mother, who could not get away from the country for their wedding, had written to him: "I keep thinking, aren't you in too much of a hurry to get married, son? You should finish your studies first, both of you, and you're still young..."

He was at the age when one don't think much about marriage and weddings, but one acts on the spur of the moment. And Basov, without quarreling with his mother, but letting her understand that in this he was his own master nevertheless, answered: "One can only get married young once!.." His mother said nothing and never raised the subject again. He thought that he had convinced her, but now it seemed that he had hurt her feelings, and he regretted that she had borne in silence his objection that had been so like a reproach.

Clearly, this unacknowledged sense of guilt before his mother was still active in him after all those years, and he passionately wanted to see Elena as the best of all women, so that even the mere thought of another seemed perfidiously base, ugly to absurdity. True, he did not consider that Elena was too clever ("With my beauty, that would be entirely superfluous!"—she made fun of herself on numerous occasions), but she was rather well-educated, and this, together with the devotion to science which Elena intended to share with Basov, was quite enough for family happiness.

Of course, they made half-joking, half-serious plans for life, and Elena, née Pryanishnikova used to say dreamily: "I shall be your Ariadne... After all, half Moscow knows the Pryanishnikovs—you understand?" He understood. "Wait," he would reply in the same spirit, "all Moscow is going to know the Basovs."

It seemed to him that with his determination he was somehow having a beneficial influence on

Elena's fiery, sometimes expansive character. Indeed, as she became closer to him, she began to behave more calmly and more self-confidently, as if there had never been a capricious, spoilt flirt of a girl.

The Pryanishnikov family, in spite of a certain external stand-offishness, was partly intellectual and partly, or slightly more than partly, fortunate and secure. The noble origins of the family, perhaps doubtful in themselves, not only gave Elena an aura of mystery, but also laid certain obligations on the parents—if not in their daughter's upbringing, then at least in the life-style, corrupted almost to unrecognisability in comparison with the real life of the gentry. Incidentally, Elena was not in the least embarrassed by this. She looked calmly on as, in the house, there now appeared, now disappeared, carved open-work shelves with porcelain elephants, cats and all possible kinds of statuettes on them, or expensive Chinese vases, which gave way to lightweight cachepots and wrought-iron candlesticks, lampstands and massive book shelves that reached from floor to ceiling and were packed with sets of subscription editions. In the final analysis, fashion is fashion, and Elena herself persuaded *Maman* to acquire a Bolognese toy dog, but it must have won medals. There was a big uproar, but they got one, and with medals too!.. All that was left of the gentry, and preserved by the parents, thanks to some miracle, was some Viennese furniture, and that was out at the country villa.

By the time that Elena's dark beauty had finally blossomed, she realised that she must live in her own way—with a brilliant husband, of course, with a great future, with significance, with an important role in high politics, where women like her, if they stood in the shadows, certainly did not play second fiddle.

The rough draft of her life was ready; all she

had to do was copy it out in fair without any mistakes. And so, with a methodicalness worthy of the best application, she proceeded to put her plan into action.

Above all, she concerned herself with social life. In a short while, her circle of acquaintances proved so wide (especially in the "Foma" circle, or, as the physicists' group called itself, the Fathers of the World) that Elena became somewhat confused. She did not, alas, have the originality to shine constantly without the repetition of witticisms, jokes, and original ideas.

And at this point, the thought that lapdogs are always nice and take a long time to become a bore impelled her to pay attention to a lanky, clumsy youth from her institute—besides, the professors were delighted with him and were prophesying a special future for him. She ignored the fact that the boy had been quite accurately dubbed "chairman of the collective farm" by the students, since this "chairman", as was immediately noted by Malyshev, had a lively and well-stocked mind. Elena was impressed by the word well-stocked, taken by her literally as implying repository of thoughts, and that was just what she wanted!

At "Foma", with the beardless "Fathers of the World", Elena was sick of hearing that science was now the most promising field of activity with the greatest future. The old men, who had received their full due from life and had been squeezed dry like lemons, were now going away forever; but the shrines cannot stay empty, however holy and inaccessible they might seem. The young will step into them; it is simply necessary not only to avoid straying into the jungle of empiricism; it is necessary to be in the limelight, at hand, and, of course, not to miss the wave that bears you aloft. And just such a young man as Nikita Basov, if he were introduced to the physicists' circle, could easily find himself on the

crest of that wave.

But could she safely rely on a person who had come to Moscow from the depths of the provinces as if from the Middle Ages, and who could not manage a knife and fork properly and blushed with shyness at a clean napkin, not knowing where to put it? But Basov had a head on his shoulders, Basov had abilities, she decided, and all the rest would somehow be put right!

She was carried away by her role as a mentor and quickly entered into the spirit of it. At her twenty years, Elena had already fathomed the mystery of power over a man. And how was she, a woman who had matured early, not to be intoxicated by the hitherto untasted feeling of the sculptor who hold in her hands not a lump of matter, of obedient clay, but a person, and an unusual one at that! Elena moulded him with pleasure, with joy, tirelessly, and the hope that she was giving, and would continue to give Nikita not less but perhaps more for life in Moscow than all the professors—this flattered her vanity and reinforced her determination.

And it happened so that the fresh shirt, the starched and the ironed cuffs, the tie, the clean-shaven face, the polished shoes, the hat and the strict order in things, especially those which he often used, became as untroublesome and natural to Basov as toothpaste or his invariable "bon appetit", even when Elena herself or, more often, her Mama or Papa were angry with their son-in-law and, in spite of the rules, answered him with a defiantly bold silence.

But after all—already an educated person and cultured, Basov did not notice this. Only when he was left alone with Elena did he laughingly repeat her own saying: "Culture is the correctly expressed concern for one's health and that of the people round one... Isn't that so?"

He was right, but the mere intonation with which

he put it to her gave Elena the shudders—as if she and she alone had the right to humiliate. For some reason, Basov was not mesmerised by her noble origins.

There was a time for him when the mere thought of Elena's name excited him. She seemed to be in raptures over him; but how often he confused rapture with candid naivety, astonishment with hauteur, and how often he took her mockery for praise, not seeing any cunning or playfulness in her words when, her black eyebrows arched, she exclaimed: "To the great, everything is always simple!" and twitched her shoulder, as if shaking it free of his gaze.

"Not everything and not always," replied Basov in a voice brittle with tension, not understanding what she was getting at. "Great minds have seen worth in simplicity not vice, so that's why they strove..."

"Come, Nikita," she interrupted, not waiting for him to finish; and, no longer angry, but affectionate as a kitten, she circled round him and asked: "I know you're clever... But please explain to me, what is simplicity? Not holy, but normal?"

"Simplicity?" he drawled, tensing at her nearness and ashamed that he had never given the matter any thought. "It's, it's..."

"You see, you don't know!" she trilled. "I don't believe it! Oh, really, Nikita, my dear!"

Exasperated, he remembered someone else's formula and answered with a precision that even he found surprising.

"Simplicity is the degree of abstraction at which the truth is like a sphere or ball. Looking at it from one side, we can fully imagine the other, that is, we abstract the object three-dimensionally..."

"You certainly rattled that off!.. Well done! So you know everything... Tell me, what am I like? You see I'm simple, ordinary... But if I'm simple, it means you can fully form a true opinion of me.

Yes?" She drew so close to him that the black ringlet on her temple touched his cheek and he caught the fragrance of her strangely gentle, never-fading perfume.

Gasping for air, embarrassed and distraught, he said:

"But you... You're not a sphere!"

"Really?" she was surprised. "How can you prove it?" She moved lightly away from him so that he wouldn't think of pawing her with his big hands.

But that was what it was leading up to. Once she took him to the villa, where he never expected to find her parents. They had to meet. Elena's father, half-blind, flabby with inactivity, cross-questioned Nikita in a tedious voice about his home, his relatives, his plans for the future; but he was obviously uninterested in him. Elena's mother, a stout, formidable woman, and once, no doubt, charming, since she had been called Albina, after listening a little, said in the well-trained voice of a primary school teacher:

"The children can go for a stroll. We take tea in two hours..."

"The children"—that rattled Nikita, but Elena towed him upstairs to her own room, whispering that they had liked him.

Before evening, Elena led him downstairs by the hand and the future mother-in-law, as she poured out the tea, glanced reproachfully at her daughter: "You know it's not nice to be late!"

"Congratulate us," Elena said. "We've decided to get married."

But the mother-in-law then needled Nikita just the same:

"Cultured people don't behave like that..."

When she heard this, Elena parried the blow:

"Do they do it differently, then?"

Elena was never at a loss for words. And somehow everything was forgiven her. The young

couple did not yet know how to live, the world round them was so beautiful that even the ugly seemed accidental. Elena did not hide it that it was she who had chosen Nikita. Why not? After all, he liked her and she liked him... Petty squabbles? Trifles!.. They must live so as to create, dare and conquer—wasn't that what the Ancient Greeks said? Incidentally, it wasn't those Greeks, but others, and they put it somewhat differently: "Come on, grab, don't miss your chance..."

After a while, Nikita noticed a frivolity in Elena unworthy even of a tenth-form schoolgirl. She had the wild idea of dragging him off to the narrow "Foma" circle, white-collar physicists, poseurs who styled themselves the "Fathers of the World". Elena seriously thought they had a future, these lay-abouts who exercised themselves with toasts. Having achieved nothing in science, and, apparently incapable of doing anything, the boys used to argue about how to be on the crest of the STR wave, overlooking the fact that the revolution was anything but a wave and only the foam stays on the crest of it.

"A striking impression, isn't it?" asked Elena, when they were coming from a "Foma" evening.

"Yes," said Nikita laughing, because he had guessed that Elena was going to ask just that question. He complimented them: "Their cocktail wasn't bad; seemed like the real thing."

"It was a Martini cocktail," explained Elena, as to the uninitiated. "They call it a 'Monkey'—à la Russe."

"That was in a film once..."

"Well, what of it? Extra proof that Foma's ideas are winning recognition."

"Monkey's toil, monkey's ideas," grinned Nikita: yet even now, years later, he was surprised that Elena felt drawn to them, and he couldn't understand it just as Elena herself couldn't

understand his indifference to Moscow and his preference for Barakhsan. Nikita allowed himself to joke some more, and in this respect it was easier for him than for her. But what is the sense of jokes if the joys of family life are recognised not on the jetty, as is right, but when the ship is already far out at sea? It upset him every time he thought about it... He wanted conditions in which he could enjoy his work—nothing much, really, a mere trifle compared with Elena's pretensions, but immeasurably great if that trifle was not feasible... It's said that they plough on fools. Plough! But it's not fools who do the job. You mustn't be a recluse in science, you must sweat at it, turn stones and do so not in white collars, but in commonplace overalls.

Finally, Elena's bitter and hurtful reproach:

"You ought to marry a formula, not a woman. Then you'd really be content!"

Yes, that man is happy for whom thought means suffering; the thought that has been suffered, cherished, in whatever form it may subsequently be expressed, as man's materialised aspiration for perfection. Even the pyramid of Cheops lives not by its geometry as such, but by the poetry of lines, the poetry of thought. And the Aniva dam, which he had already built in his mind and which he knew all over, from its foundations to its crest, meant little to him as a man-made geometric mountain of concrete. The secret was that his dam worked, and its applied function elevated it above the pyramids, just as the thought of this elevated the people who had honourably shared dangers and hard work on the Aniva.

Perhaps it had been worthwhile to leave for the Aniva simply in order to realise this.

Elena insisted that she was wasting her best years there. She reproached him. But he was ready to admit in all sincerity that he had not lost a day or hour of his life there. His proposed

version of closing the river was the best proof of that. But this operation was not a freak success. The solution had legitimately come from the system of dynamic calculations which he had already begun working out at the institute, only at that time the idea had been hidden under a bushel of weighty formulae, whereas here it had virtually grown wings. So that Malyshev had been right, hinting how important, instructive sometimes, and useful practical experience was for theory. If Nikita was stubborn, if he refused an appointment to the Kola Peninsula or to the Aniva, he would not find the solution.

All Basov had to do now was close the Aniva, show that he was right in practice and not just on paper; then he could put his notes in order. The long sought-after and long tormenting, Algorithm E, so called and dedicated back in Moscow to Elena, would be published... Clearly, he would be happy and relieved, and there would probably be people who would be happy for him and even some who would remember that he was Malyshev's pupil, and would be happy for Academician Malyshev. But would Elena understand and what would be her attitude to the little surprise when it was disclosed that the algorithm featured the first letter of her name?

Basov tried not to predict Elena's reaction; he was afraid to guess and be wrong, but he wanted her to remember that conversation long ago after his dissertation and say, "Forgive me, Nikita, I was mistaken..." However, she recalled her mistakes too seldom. Was that, perhaps, why she didn't admit to them—because he was willing to forgive her for errors? He himself believed that mistakes ultimately lead to the truth. If they are not repeated, if one does not make the most fatal of them. But in our age, to talk of fate is unfashionable and absurd. Surely it was clear that without that scene there would never have been

the hurtful reproaches afterwards, and the insults, and the irritable dissatisfaction with one another, and much else that was minor and petty, that seems to have been forgotten, as trivial, but still haunts the mind?

"The reputation of being Malyshev's pupil and even Malyshev's own reputation may hamper you in the future," Elena said at the time. "One-sidedness and prejudices are bad, especially in science, where everything's so changeable and unstable..."

"Oh, come, Elena," he said outraged. "Because of what Malyshev did for us—for me at any rate—you mustn't dare think such things. Please, don't stoop so low... You should be ashamed of yourself!"

"Of course, for you he's the infallible authority!.. He helped you! But that's his duty. Be grateful to him, say thank you... But as for him being an academic and a former star"—and she was being openly ironic now—"He's an academic and a fading star."

"I don't want to hear any more of this!" he exploded.

"You've got to. I happen to care that you're wasting yourself."

"But that's stupid! Stupid, dammit!" he swore. "You're simply playing the fool. You should join the circus, they wear loud clothes there all the time. But I'm not a clown! Oh, my dear, you must work, work, and have done with all these..."

"Hm. To get back to the point," she sneered, "Malyshev won't give you a department."

"But you will..."

"Maybe... At any rate, without his patronage, we can be offered the chance to go abroad for a start... And that wouldn't be so bad!"

"Aha, uncle suggests," he said, gloomily sarcastic. "Kindly get yourself fixed up, I've no objections. Only count me out."

Elena shrugged her shoulders.

"You'll simply be turned down," she said.

"Well? What of it?"

"Nothing. You'll be finished. You'll be desperate, and it'll be too late. I don't want that. What's the sense in refusing such a chance?"

"Oh, you—you're always trying to upstage somebody!" blurted out Nikita, and, not answering her any more, silently got ready and made for the door.

"If you go to Malyshev," she shouted after him, "don't you dare come back here!"

For several days, Basov did not show up at home. He spent the nights in the institute hostel for old times sake, but only went to see Malyshev a week later.

The nearer Tikhon Svetozarovich approached old age, the more worriedly he would peer at many of his pupils, of whom Nikita Basov was particularly dear to him. While keeping it a secret from his friends and colleagues, Malyshev pinned the best of his unfulfilled hopes on Basov's future. It is hard to say why this was so. He had had pupils before and many of them had been talented boys; but, in making a fuss of Nikita, he felt alarmed at the thought that this was one of his last; he would not have the time left to give any more of them a helping hand.

He did not like thinking big about his modest work. The journalists and biographers, Malyshev thought, were clearly exaggerating his part as the pilot in Soviet hydroelectric engineering. But a young assistant must sooner or later take his place beside him on the bridge of science, and he must train him to take over the helm. It was time.

"It has been reported to me," he said jokingly as he greeted Nikita, "that the young star is tormented by Hamlet's questions? Does he, perhaps, think that his thesis has been shelved and he's stuck with nothing to do now?"

"It could be so," agreed Nikita, embarrassed that the old man knew all about it.

"Oh, well!" Malyshev left it at that. "Shall we drink tea or do you prefer a drop of brandy now that you are a candidate?"

"I'll make the tea, Tikhon Svetozarovich. Do sit down," said Nikita, noting that Malyshev looked off colour.

"Oh, well," Malyshev sighed.

He was indeed off colour these days.

In spite of all the necessary care and precautions, he had been caught by the last wave of a waning flu epidemic. Thank God, he had already spent the minimum time in bed and now was up again, in spite of weakness and nagging pains in the joints. He half-reclined in an armchair; the knitted scarf had slipped from his neck, and when he was racked by a dry cough, Adam's apple jerked convulsively under the white, flabby senile skin. After spending some time with Malyshev and reassuring him, Nikita glanced pointedly at his watch and hastened to get ready, but Malyshev, without asking any questions, stopped him with an abrupt gesture of the hand—sit down! When he had regained his breath and had slipped a menthol tablet under his tongue, he sat up and looked for a long time through the window at the ant-heap of housing blocks with their shining snowy peaks and summits. With the once blue eyes now pale behind the spectacle-lenses, Malyshev's face turned pink, perhaps because of his recent coughing fit or perhaps because of the glow from the weak, wintry setting sun. Nikita did not know what he was thinking about, but he felt that it would be best not to disturb him.

"It's been overcast since morning, a write-off," thought Malyshev. He had begun noting that the longer the shadows on the ground and the nearer his sun was to setting, the more precious became the moments of peace and sad sincerity that he

recognised in nature. Something mysterious and enchanting was hidden in the snowy brilliance of the Moscow roofs as they reflected the evening sky, a radiance that seemed accessible neither to the understanding nor to the gaze of the crowd as they bustled past below with their cares and their worries. He did not want to think that he was better than others. Better in what way? On earth, people are distinguished by their achievements, but to the heavens all are one and equal. The light would not go out when he was gone and the great equilibrium would not be disturbed. Why then, did he yearn so much not to part with that sky and that sunset, but to contemplate them for all time to come?

Perhaps these were just the worries of old age. Neither Dasha, were she here, nor Nikita Basov or any of the young ones would understand him. But when they realised that happiness consists of living—it would transpire that all is behind and they can't take anything with them. Even the memory of the past does not go into the grave. And so he asked:

"What does a man take with him from this life when he leaves it?"

"What he was born with," replied Nikita without a second thought.

Malyshev laughed quietly, half-covering his mouth with his hand. Pure gold; a good lad, Basov; but he didn't realise how silly his doubts were. Young? Didn't Malyshev, at Basov's age, dream of the first project going straight from the rough drafts to the blueprints. Let him have the money, the builders and the equipment without delay! Let all the obstructions collapse and let recognition come... What it was to be young! But when he had built the power-station, would he think of inviting Malyshev to close the knife-switch?

"Well you see," said Malyshev as if continuing

his reflections and wrapping his scarf more tightly round him, "You've been unlucky, Nikita... It's very bad," he stressed cheerfully, "when there aren't any mistakes in a thesis. No real blunders! For which you could be thrashed. The most viable projects are never without mistakes. Anyone who's actually built anything knows that... Because some overlooked dolerites, or devil's crags, or quick grounds will make hay of all your fancy figures. But it's too late to back down, you've got to extricate yourself, you've got to prove your case... But I love all that! You think, not this way, then that way, but it's still going to be *my* way. Ah, yes, you can tell the masters by their mistakes..."

"Why this lyrical flight?" asked Basov, frowning.

"There's no getting through to such unfeeling blockheads as you! Which is why they won't let you near the sites," said Malyshev, not to be outdone.

They laughed at one another without taking offence, except that Basov decided to shine with his learning all the same, and Malyshev noted how painstakingly he replaced his casual "project people" with the full dignity of "project designers". He understood the logic of this author, at least. Fortunately, here was no craving for glory, but a fully understandable and explicable young man's ambition, the desire to show to all, and above all, to himself, what he could do. Malyshev did not want to convince inexperienced opponent. He simply waited until the torrent of objections had run dry, until Basov's thought, meeting no resistance from Malyshev, came round to where their conversation had begun, and then Basov stopped. He sighed—he didn't know what to say about a project. Would there be one some time?

"There will," said Malyshev casually.

"But when?"

"It's no secret now. The prospects for the Arctic have already been under discussion and are on the agenda. Not on such a wide scale, true, because Siberia has priority for the time being; but oil, gas, and ores point North, nearer to us." The old man winked knowingly, seeing Basov's eyes light up. "We shall be getting the main power from breeders, by thermonuclear synthesis on "Tokamaks"; but the hydroelectric stations will be the first stage..."

"When, Tikhon Svetozarovich, when?"

"As soon as we've dug the canals along which to pump the electricity."

"No, I mean it seriously."

"Why not? You'll never ring the North with cables, it's too difficult. But a canal system, or at least an underground cable system, could cover the whole of the North, from Kamchatka to Kola... And even further! Why not throw the excess power into Canada, America and the Scandinavian countries?"

With a tired gesture, Malyshev pointed to the map on the wall, and only now did Nikita see the red dotted lines along the coast of the Arctic Ocean. They had not been there before! He went up to the map, feeling excited at the thought that *this* already existed.

...Prospects were opening up before him about which he himself had thought, and Malyshev had spoken, as a remote dream. The audience at Malyshev's lectures—students, post-graduates and young scientists, who loved Malyshev for his devotion to his idea and mildly ridiculed, envied the enthusiasm and passion with which he substantiated and developed new aspects of a problem that was a long way from the immediate present—all of them, as they applauded Malyshev, considered themselves sober and sensible people, each thirsted and strove for a specific cause, entirely tangible and feasible. And, perhaps, better than

they, his young colleagues, Malyshev understood that one must not condemn and take offence at them when their imaginations were stirred by the gigantic scale of the dams and foaming seas in Siberia, when there was someone to respect, that same Andrei Bochkin, already a legend, who with his iron grip had tamed nearly a dozen mighty rivers. But was there only Bochkin? What about Semyon Kalizhnyuk? A man of desperate daring, fortitude and insight; the first director of the Vakhsh Hydroelectric Station, who had begun the construction at a time when plans and projects were still being discussed and authorised at top level. If Kalizhnyuk had slacked off or retreated a single step, there was no knowing what fate might have overtaken the unconquerable Vakhsh... Malyshev understood better than his pupils that the Arctic needed its own school. He would himself have rolled up his sleeves and taken charge of it, but you can't live your life twice over; his time had come for seeding, the seeds had been sown, and all he could do was to wait for the first shoots and hope that at least one of many might soar like an eagle on the wings of his dream. And this desire, the passion of an old man, nevertheless ran ahead of the reality. It was not enough for him to see Basov simply as a scientist, he wanted to see him as a Builder, and, in order not to spoil this fine workpiece prematurely, Basov must be pushed into the thick of things. It is impossible to become a serious organiser without knowing what the bread of the builders and engineers smells like and what it costs them. But it was not enough for Malyshev to want this. Basov himself must make the choice.

Knitting his brows and concealing his excitement, Malyshev was watching Basov as he stood in front of the map; he saw his cheeks flush and the sharp cheek-bones protrude, tightly covered with smooth skin. Malyshev even noticed a blue vein

throbbing on Basov's temple; but the boy's feelings and thoughts were inaccessible, and all Malyshev's wisdom could not help him to fathom them. How insignificant it seemed, in comparison with this desire!

Basov had been aware of the old man tensing up as he went over to the map. On the fringe of awareness, he was surprised at this, but he soon forgot everything: his eyes were riveted on the red dotted lines encompassing the empty upper part of the map from west to east, not yet marked by names. Basov was undismayed that years and perhaps decades lay between the idea and its fulfilment—he could not and would not think about it; he was seeking—all over the vastness of the North—the place, the point, the trigonometrical sign to which his destiny must be attached.

His face pale, he looked round at Malyshev.

"What am I to do, Tikhon Svetozarovich?"

"Work, Nikita Leontievich. What else? The project is yours, and your project can turn out to be one of the bridgeheads. Most likely it will be on the Aniva..."

"When can I..."

Malyshev did not let him finish.

"Not so fast, not so fast. There's quite a lot been done in the North already, and something is being done now, as you know. They've thought up some rather interesting generators on the Voronya... A brook, but it's going to drive two power stations, and the generators are big ones. How about that, eh? That's on the Kola Peninsula! Marvellous people there..."

"Have I the strength," Basov was wondering in the meantime, "to carry out Malyshev's plan to the full?" It would be the simplest thing in the world to turn it down now. But never and nowhere, as long as he could remember, had he been a seasonal worker. He must not take on such a job and leave a loop-hole—whether some whim

of his wife's or his own weakness—in order to wriggle out of it in the event of failure. The creation of an electric power grid demanded total devotion, the most enormous concentration of the mental faculties, of the will, of physical strength, perhaps of his whole life. Here, without exaggeration, a gigantic project was in the pipeline, and the more carefully Basov weighed everything up, the clearer it became that his knowledge would be needed in building the first project of the system on the hitherto unknown Aniva.

...A few days later, Basov left for the Kola Peninsula as shift engineer. Elena saw him off, convinced that he would be back in two or three months. Only Malyshev knew that people sometimes come back from such trips only years afterwards. Steeling himself, he had the decency to caution Nikita:

"Be ready for this... And in general, when I was an engineer..." He sighed. "Those were my best years. But that was a long time ago, you see, in the dawn of my misty youth..."

Basov had been working for nearly two years on the Serebryanka when Malyshev recalled him to Moscow with an urgent telegram to work with Alimushkin on forming the Aniva expedition. Had he wished, Basov could have spent the whole of that year at home, but a month later he flew to the Aniva with the advance team. Even then, Elena tried to dissuade him, threatening him with divorce, but, strange to say, either in her conclusions and in the desire to leave her husband in Moscow there was none of the former passion or conviction and so she quarrelled with him slackly, with a kind of inner distress which she was afraid to reveal, or Basov himself had changed so much that Elena's railing and all the logic of her arguments did not seem worth taking seriously. She, of course, was acutely aware of this.

Basov, who had matured on the Kola Peninsula, was sound and relaxed—his every word breathed dignity and confidence.

"Leave it. It's my work," he said, after hearing her out.

"But why does it have to be where I can't go?"

"You can, you just don't want to. You'd do better to come to where I am... Perhaps we'll begin to understand one another again."

A year later, when he was given a flat on the Aniva, he telegraphed: "Come, Lena! You won't regret it."

In the meantime, her mother commented:

"As you wish... But Uncle Boris has a nephew..."

"I don't need the nephew; maybe I need Uncle Boris!" snapped Elena.

She went all the same. Basov advised her to go by steamer along the Yenisei—she could have a rest and look at the mighty Siberian landscapes—she might never get the chance again. He would meet her with a launch in the Aniva estuary. But Elena snorted: "Just think, he's found Switzerland there too!.." And—just because it wasn't his idea—she went by plane to Igarka.

There was no regular air transport between Igarka and Barakhsan, but Elena was in luck; a helicopter was going to the Aniva on a special flight and they took her on board. She had a fellow-traveller, a heavily built, white-haired man in a shaggy grey woollen sweater. Judging by his garments, the built-up heels of his boots and his wind-blown face that had not seen the sun for a long time, this was a man of the Arctic, probably from the Aniva, she decided, a supplier!

"Are you going to Barakhsan?" shouted Elena, because it was impossible to speak in an ordinary voice. The iron fuselage of the helicopter boomed as if being belaboured on the sides with cudgels.

"Ye-es!" he replied, also shouting.

"How's the chief of the right bank there?" she asked in order to show that she knew something about things on the Aniva.

"Who-o-o?"

"Bas-sov, Basov!"

"Ah!" he said slowly, then smiled. "He's the chief engineer of the project now."

Elena was surprised. She hadn't heard about the new appointment. He'd prepared a nice little surprise for her arrival!

The helicopter was shaking. The roar and rattle of the engine made it hard to talk, and her travelling companion showed no interest—he preferred to keep looking out of the window. Elena couldn't resist it and asked:

"A long time ago?"

"How a long time ago?"

"Was he appointed a long time ago?"

"Yesterday." He grinned and turned away.

Dense taiga was flowing past the porthole, not at all like the consumptive, as they call it, northern taiga. There were tall green firs and larches; sometimes there were crooked, densely branched birch-trees, easily distinguishable from above by the curly green of the pale branches. Elena peered into clumps of trees and steep gullies, expecting to see a reindeer fleeing in terror or tossing back its great antlers, or at least a wolf, or just bear-cubs, as in the cinema; but it was no use, there was nothing exotic. The trees below suddenly thinned out and diminished noticeably in height, and a narrow strip of flood-plain tundra passed under the helicopter with its flowers and its many kinds of grasses. But the grasses soon grew thinner, as if trampled on by herds, and little lakes began to appear like puddles after rain, sooty black and strung together on the thin threads of streams. Then the grasses almost disappeared entirely—interrupted by reddish, clayey bald patches, and the ground under the helicopter was

sliding away somewhere, always on the tilt. "Further on, no doubt, there'll be wilderness," thought Elena, "and the Arctic Ocean..."

On the rim of the horizon, in a haze of smoke, mist or low cloud, there was a glimpse of undulating hills, and under the belly of the helicopter there appeared a little wooden two-storey building with an orange roof, half-hidden in a bushy copse. On the other side, in front of it, lay a landing-field as smooth as a stadium and marked with white indicator stripes and arrows. Elena could not see a town or river anywhere in the vicinity. Perhaps this wasn't really Barakhsan.

As if frightened of its own shadow, the throbbing machine passed over the strip to where a black-and-white striped windsock was flapping on a tall mast and there was a gravel helicopter pad.

Elena clung to her duralumin seat and the wandering smile froze on her face.

If the airport building was so tiny, what about the met station that Basov had written about? A hut on chicken's legs or a Finnish wooden chalet surmounted with the antlers of aerials and surrounded by a wire fence? Under the window, a rattling wind-speed indicator, its vanes made out of a tin can, and a narrow little path to the river from the door... Post No. So-and-so of the Hydrometeorological Service of the USSR. And every day the same thing over and over again: wind-force, pressure, temperature, river velocity at point x, y, z; and when you had nothing to do you could occupy yourself with isotherms, isobars on a nation-wide or even on world-wide scale. Such was the bliss he had conferred on her.

Without doing the usual circuit before landing, the helicopter began losing height in an oblique curve and hung there for a moment, its engines drumming. About ten people ran out of the little building to meet it. She hadn't warned Nikita, which meant that it was her travelling companion

who was being met. "I wonder who he is? He didn't even give his name..." Tightening her lips with chagrin, she let him go first.

They were meeting Gatilin.

They had learned about his arrival the day before in Barakhsan, just as they had learned about Basov's appointment. Until that day, Basov had still been chief of the right bank. The work-force, once nineteen men, had grown to three thousand. With such people you could speed up the preparatory work, and Basov, without waiting for orders from head office, had gradually been forming the main units, sectors and services. It now turned out that everything he had done had been taken into consideration at his appointment...

From the semidarkness of the helicopter cabin, Elena saw the restrained greetings between Basov and her travelling companion; they surveyed one another briefly and appraisingly, then shook hands. They were at once surrounded...

Basov hadn't changed. He was wearing sunglasses—he had never been able to abide them before, but in every other respect he was the same: a smartly tailored suit, black, like the hat that went with it; a white shirt with the invariable necktie. The same alertness and upright bearing. But from the neat lay of his tie and the starched whiteness of his well-ironed shirt, Elena knew that he was not wanting attention here.

The disgruntled pilot walked past Elena. He silently took a step-ladder out of the luggage compartment, attached it to the side of the open hatch and looked silently at Elena. She thanked him and went down on to the ground.

She had prepared a special greeting for Nikita: "I thought," she would say, laughing, "that you would meet me with a brood of young Nikitas..." But it didn't work out that way, it misfired; in fact Nikita was not the first to notice her. Herself young-looking, in a short dress, striking with her

dark beauty, she suddenly found herself surrounded by strange men who thought she was Gatilin's wife. She did not know that Anya, seizing the moment, had whispered to Basov, "Don't forget to say hullo to Gatilin's wife, she's feeling embarrassed..." He turned round sharply and, without understanding anything, looked at Elena, who was also flabbergasted.

"What d'you mean?" he shouted. "That's my wife... Lena!"

"How d'you know she's yours," asked Silin with a grin. "Maybe she was!"

Gatilin shook his head and said to Nikita, amid general laughter:

"We'll share the wives out..."

Everything else rose up vaguely before Elena; the road, the steep terraces of the banks, and the launch on which they were crossing the river. It was like a dream, and only the Aniva surprised her—rushing down from the Rapids, the white-foamed crests fluttered like a wedding veil, its train snagging on the rocks... Then Elena saw the streets of Barakhsan, the asphalt purring under the wheels, and around were nothing but trees—firs, larches and patches of scrub. In the gaps, on the crossroads, stood wide-windowed houses. They were reminiscent of a green country villa settlement outside Moscow, not a builders' town beyond the Arctic Circle.

July is the height of the Arctic summer. The warm shimmer of the white nights shrouded the plain of the tundra, as vast as the steppe. Heavy with luxuriant foliage, the forests dreamed peacefully outside Barakhsan. The hills were dark with a mysterious twilight. A quivering mist writhed the Aniva, which was filling up with water from the shallows after the Rapids. In the distance could be heard the jittery, drowsy drumming of quails.

Elena was to remember that first night on the Aniva. "Northern Lights", a cocktail of bubbly

and brandy, had gone to her head. Elena leaned over Nikita and, sliding the black tresses of her loose hair from hand to hand, she tickled his face and neck and laughed, brushing the lobe of his ear with moist lips. Suddenly she froze, and then trembled eagerly, like a young mare, her nostrils quivering, savouring the half-forgotten wormwood odour of his body. Incoherent words escaped her lips, and when she no longer had the strength to unwind their clasped hands, already half-asleep, he murmured, "Lena, bear us a charming little girl, all right?" she shrank, and her skin turned cold, like grass under dew, and she pretended to be asleep.

She was woken up by the chill before dawn. Nikita had gone, but her body still preserved his warmth. He had warned her that he would leave early... Covering her breast with her hands, she leaned out of the window. The broad street was shimmering with the lilac of the sky reflected in the recently rolled asphalt. In the distance, Nikita, in a white sports shirt, was on his way to the Aniva. She wanted to call to him, but then looked at herself and jumped back from the window.

She pushed her head into a dress, stepped into her flip-flops and, tidying herself as she went, screwing her hair into a bun—she had somehow managed to have some hairpins in her teeth—she ran after him. The thrill of the chase quickly gave way to fear of losing sight of him. Nikita suddenly veered off into the forest, and it took her a while to grasp that the path turned at that point.

Elena saw him again when she came to Fraternity Rock. Nikita had already gone down to the Rapids.

The Aniva was roaring along below. The river was rising in order to leap up and fly through the rocky rapids at one go, but it hadn't the strength. Its gigantic silver-grey wing buckled and, hitting

the rocks, trailed along, flapping and fluttering, to be drawn into the whirlpool—only fragile scraps of foam sailed up beyond the shoals and were swept on, like white feathers tinged with blue... The narrow wooden bridge hung swaying like a hammock over the flood. A girl was standing in the middle of the bridge. Elena recognised something familiar in the slim figure, belted in at the waist. She was already waving to Nikita and shouting something, but the words were indistinguishable.

Nikita stepped on to the bridge and it began to undulate under his tread like a caterpillar. A little more, and the Aniva's pointed crest would reach it and lash the cables.

"Niki-i-ita!" shouted Elena.

She ran down and was already close to them. The wind suddenly snatched up the skirt of her dress; she was just in time to get hold of it. She stopped. Nikita looked round. And when he looked at her, as did Anya—Elena had recognised her now—at that moment a slender, dazzling ray of light shone at eye-level, and it took Elena a moment to grasp that this was a copper cable stretched over the bridge as a safety precaution, and it was glittering in the light of the sun rising beyond the river.

She remembered that day before, at home, when they had been sitting at table to celebrate her arrival and the appointments of Basov and Gatilin. A sunbeam just like it had traversed the room, and she had then been able to follow Nikita's glance meeting the watchful, enquiring eyes of Anya at the opposite end of the table.

This happened after the already somewhat tipsy Korostylev had been fooling about and had envied Basov for his wife. Flattered, she had reached out and patted Nikita on the head, pulled his head towards her and had then turned pale, aware of his tenseness, the tight resistance of the muscles.

He drew his head in between his shoulders; she had already let go, hoping that no one had noticed, had not understood, not even Nikita himself; but he was still stubbornly staring at the same point, eye to eye with Anya.

"Hullo, Lena!" cried Anya cheerfully from the bridge, and she laughed and waved her hand. She turned round and ran over the swaying bridge deck to the other side of the river.

"Where are you going?" asked Elena when Nikita came up to her.

"To the hill. Let's both go!.. We're going to have a look at the site for the TV tower, or we won't be in time to put it up for Builder's Day."

"You two are together, aren't you?"

"Oh, come off it, Lena! Over there," and he was already laughing at her jealousy, nodding towards the opposite bank, "there's a cross-country truck waiting. Five people, with you making six. As a woman, of course, you'll be the first, outside competition. Let's go, they're waiting."

"No," she said, blushing.

He didn't understand.

"Like this?" She reached for her breast and opened her dress a little way. Nikita saw that she had nothing on underneath... Did he have to control himself and not kiss her cool breast? Why, she would have let him... But he knew what she didn't: that on the bridge they were plainly visible to the builders on the right and left banks... All Barakhsan knew that Basov's wife had come to stay with him.

...Elena did not ask any superfluous questions, instead she paid close attention and remembered well how the foreman came to Nikita and began complaining that the place where they were intending to put up the TV tower wouldn't do, there wasn't even a trace of rock foothold. "We dig and we dig, and there's no end to it, it's

bottomless. Sludge..."

"Well?" asked Basov.

"We found a ledge a bit lower. Perhaps we could cement the foundations there?"

"Does Odarchenko know?"

"Yes."

"Meaning what?"

"'Dig in the old place,' she said."

"Do as Odarchenko told you. That's all."

Why such confidence in Anya's infallibility? It wasn't enough that she was an intelligent engineer, as many said, and that she was from the advance team; after all, Basov found it necessary to quarrel with Korostylev, Gatilin, and others too...

"Well, you see," he laughed, "a woman makes very few mistakes if she's trusted. As behind the wheel."

"That doesn't apply to me?"

"Of course not. You're a bunch of outright contradictions."

"Rubbish," she thought. "It's simply that real women aren't capable of self-denial. Because they always were and always will be prevented by their biological function—it's in their nature, their very being. The active ones are always unsatisfied somehow, and that makes them more dangerous..."

Perhaps because Nikita was not hiding his delight with Anya, Elena began noticing trifles which she would not have considered important before. It annoyed her, for instance, that Anya was at the chief engineer's every morning and attended the planning sessions and technical conferences at Gatilin's, to which she was seldom personally invited. Anya was always with Basov at Party meetings, trade union and Party Committee meetings, and in the club, and here, there and everywhere. Even when Basov and Gatilin went to visit the Nganasani, Anya went with them too. There was absolutely no substantial grounds for

jealousy, but this only increased her suspicions. Suffering changed something in Elena's soul, a string snapped, and the world seemed altogether changed, although in public she remained as energetic as always and up to her ears in work, so that the young girls at the met station, yesterday's tenth-formers, felt a certain distance between themselves and Elena and with ill-concealed painstakingness tried to copy her way of holding her head up and her ability to say unpleasant things in a calm, level voice or to squelch someone in conversation with a supercilious stare. This harmless corruption did not touch or amuse Elena as before—let them think that this was the secret of her power over Basov...

She often found herself at home alone, especially in the mornings. Nikita always used to get up and leave when it was dark, and, woken by the front door slamming behind him, she usually took those first moments of loneliness very badly, listening eagerly to the sound of his footsteps dying away, first down the stairs, then over the asphalt. A vague and unaccountable terror overcame her, as in childhood, and it seemed that the night, engulfing half the world, and her solitude in that night would never end. Not a sound... No doubt, she thought, condemning people to silence in a sound-proof cell had been specially invented as the most appalling and unbearable form of torture... But what had she done to deserve such anguish?

The green light of the standard-lamp at her bedside and the crackling of the radio loudspeaker calmed her nerves.

Often in the nights, when Nikita was working, sitting up in his room till late, she would go up to his door, barefoot, with her hair down over her shoulders, but, on taking hold of the door-handle, she would stop herself. She would hear the papers rustling and would hold her breath when Nikita

angrily threw down a pencil or a slide-rule, and she would hastily assume a welcoming smile, expecting him to come at any moment, but no... She wanted Nikita to embrace her, fragrant as she was with pine salts after her evening bath, and she would fight off his strong embraces and yield to him, with weakness smoothing the reproaches and offences... And at such moments she felt strong and magnanimous; she believed that to him she was dearer than dams or anything else in this world. What was all that compared with her suffering and desires?

This mood passed, however, and Elena became convinced that he didn't need her.

Nikita lived his own life, dry, official, and there was no place for her in it. The Serebryanka, and then the Aniva, and his jobs, however superior they might seem for Barakhsan, all lost their glamour in her eyes. He was drifting away from her into his work, and the more she understood this, the less hope remained that one day she would win him round. Even earlier, he had been intractable and now he was worse. She was fed up. She was tired. Everything had gone to pieces. She was no longer in despair when she said to him, "Make up your mind, Basov..." She knew that this was the end; he would never leave this place, but she waited just the same. In vain, as it turned out. But the North, the Aniva or Anya—did it make any difference what kept him here? She kept postponing her departure.

The Arctic autumn fluttered past like a coloured kerchief, and everything became dark.

The weeks flew quickly by, and the tension with which the project waited for the closing of the Aniva and the very anticipation of that date were forcing a certain determination on people and even a certain reticence. Nearly everyone, including Elena associated the river-closing with certain private plans, and perhaps for that reason the eve

of the operation seemed so disturbing.

It is hard to understand and explain how the predetermined fate of the Aniva could affect the destinies of human beings, or even whether it could, but Elena remembered with what excitement even a month ago—and the nearer the time came, the more intense it was—she herself had been waiting for the arrival of cold September with its drizzling rains and its snows. When finally it arrived, that night before the twenty-third, and nothing untoward happened, Elena was not even surprised. Yes, she had been deceived, or her expectations had deceived her—there was no great difference. Probably she could still give way to Basov—all he had to do was go down on his knees in front of her. Without avowals, without explanations, let him merely bend down and press his lips to her shoulder. She would then go to work with a light heart and would not lie, silent and cold as ice, on the cold mattress, cursing herself. And Anya too... Whatever Nikita might say, he liked Anna. Women do not need proof against other women.

There was an opaque, blue-grey shell on the table in his room. Elena liked the sea-shell and the handful of pearls in it, silvery blue, like plums. Before the Aniva, when Nikita was working on the Serebryanka Cascade, he had caught them himself and when she first saw the pearls, she thought that they would make her a nice pair of earrings. Nikita laughed and said:

"No, Lena, you're wrong. Look how dark you are... Your hair, and your eyes..."

"Keep them for another, I'm not insisting," she flared up.

"If we have a daughter," he argued, not noticing her outburst, "I am somehow convinced that she'll be grey-eyed, just like me, and we'll make her a necklace for her wedding. A nice present, don't you think?"

Well, Basov was Basov, he was always right. Only not on that point.

Elena pictured how Nikita, before sitting at the table, combed his hair carefully for a long time, and a minute later it was already tousled and on end again. She clearly saw his grey, slightly frowning eyes, and a typical gesture of his: he rubbed the bridge of his nose quickly when he was thinking. His eyes were stern and unsmiling. They seemed to be following her, were somewhere very near, and Elena cringed in spite of herself.

If only she could suddenly destroy everything that tied Nikita to Barakhsan! Slice it, burn it, chop it into little pieces! Everything that was dear, sacred, and inviolable to him—from Malyshev's portrait in the heavy red copper frame to that shell, to the finely sharpened pencils, to the neatly stacked books on hydrodynamics, the reference works with their bookmarks as neat as the labels in a chemist's shop.

She could do it! But how was she acquire the necessary determination?

IV

Before it appeared on the map, Barakhsan already had its history, and for this it was indebted above all to the scientists and the Party who, long before the first peaceful blasting shots were fired in the North, were concerned with the prospects for the social and economic transformation of the land.

Alimushkin frequently caught himself out thinking that like hundreds of other builders who had left their homes and safe routine jobs in order to begin a construction project in the unknown, terribly cold and snowy Arctic, he had not realised how precisely and clearly the future of Barakhsan had been drawn up and included in the state plans and how feasible it already was when they said to him:

"Pyotr Evseyevich, you are a builder... You have knowledge and the experience of Party work... We want to recommend you as Party Organiser for a construction project in Siberia, in the Arctic, to build a hydroelectric power station on the Aniva. Not Bratsk, of course, but a very important project, specially for the future of the area. It's strictly voluntary, so think, don't be in a hurry, then give your opinion."

Alimushkin went down from the Old Square [1] to Nogin Square and along the embankment past the Zaryadye: then he went as far as the Kremlin, walked round the Vodovzvodnaya Tower, past the Alexandrovsky Gardens, and so into Red Square.

He was not thinking that almost every day he could walk past the Kremlin and admire the gilded domes of its soring cathedrals and marvel at the elegance and airy lightness of the cathedral of St. Basil the Blessed, raised heavenwards by talented craftsmen [2]. It was possible to wear out more than one pair of shoes on the blue granite flagstones round the Kremlin, to surprise, on occasion, curious foreigners with tales of the horrors perpetrated at the Lobnoye Mesto [3] and not to know that tomorrow or some other day the hour would come when everything sacred that Moscow had preserved and cherished would enter into the soul like the shimmering chimes of the evening, the ruby-red stars, or the precise step of the soldiers marching towards the eternal vigil. And something in the soul would thrill and respond to the majesty and peace of that moment, and you would say to yourself, repeating it like an oath: "Russia, I am your son..." And then you would understand that

[1] Where the CC of the CPSU building is situated.— *Ed.*

[2] The cathedral on Red Square in Moscow, built in 1555-1560 by the architects Barma and Postnik.— *Ed.*

[3] A stone dais on Red Square in Moscow, erected in the 1530s.— *Ed.*

it is for such revelations that Moscow and Russia cherish the ancient walls of the Kremlin, the glory of bygone times and the present day.

Looking back on the past, Alimushkin now understood that, as the tired wayfarer hastens to the spring to quench his thirst and fortify himself, so the memory of one's parents' home fills the heart with hope of a happy return.

But at that time he was worried by problems that were private and personal. What, for instance, should he do about the flat? That he had thought about it at all indicated his agreement to leave, and the further logic of Alimushkin's reasoning already depended and flowed from this decision which he had virtually made.

The Alimushkins had a one-room flat, and he had been living with his daughter Sonya; but she had recently moved to stay with her mother-in-law, who had temporarily given the young couple a room.

He felt sorry for Sonya. She had been without a mother for the last five years (Alimushkin's wife, Marusya, had died of cancer); he had evidently been too lenient; she was self-willed. As soon as she was eighteen, she rushed off to the Registry Office, wouldn't listen to reason, wouldn't wait. If Alimushkin left for Siberia, then everything would soon sort itself out. They would finish their studies during that time; his son-in-law was already in his fourth year at the Bauman Institute of Technology. And, with his Northern allowances, it would be easier for Alimushkin to accumulate enough money to buy a flat for the young couple.

The second problem seemed more complicated, and it was the main one.

Alimushkin's father, a regimental commissar, had been killed in the winter of 1941 on the Istra Defence Line and his mother, on receiving the death notice, went to the front as a nurse in the

spring of 1942, leaving Pyotr in the care of his aunt. The hospital, as his mother wrote in her letters, was a long way from the front line, but in war bombs fall near and far; his mother had been hit by a splinter and it had not been possible to save her life. And so, an orphan at thirteen, Alimushkin refused to go to an orphanage and, occasionally having his meals at his aunt's place, went back to his flat on the Taganka and studied, first at secondary school, then at a factory vocational centre.

He was lucky in his comrades, as decent people are always lucky in having good friends. When he was serving in the army, his company commander, a Captain Mikhailov, said when recommending Alimushkin for the Party: "You understand, Petro, a communist is always a soldier. And you know yourself that a soldier's place isn't where it's sweet, but where he's necessary. That's an order for the rest of your life..."

Alimushkin remembered those words. And it was not about turning down the new job that he was thinking, but that, in taking it on, he had no right blindly to exploit the Party's trust. Before finally deciding, he must talk to someone who would tell him what was out there and on what scale it was being planned, on the Aniva.

It was agreed at the Head Office that Alimushkin should be received by Academician Malyshev for a talk.

...So there they were, standing face to face in Malyshev's spacious hall. His host, of average weight, perhaps even a little on the thin side, a brisk little old man with a white goatee beard, wearing old-fashioned spectacles with long sides, in a white unbuttoned shirt and felt—yes, felt!—boots was studying his visitor.

The tall Alimushkin, austere in a dark jacket and trousers, black-haired and clean-shaven,

seemed older than his years to Malyshev. His visitor was noticeably a shade embarrassed; he painstakingly averted his eyes from his host's felt boots and did not know where to put his hat, now holding it in front of him, now hurriedly putting it behind his back. He was round-shouldered, and by the way the lapels of his tightly buttoned jacket stuck out on his chest, it was not hard to guess that the formal severity of the suit and his entire bearing were especially laid on for this meeting. Malyshev always made fun of the stiffness of people who changed so uncomfortably meeting an academician, as if he were a general.

"Why are you so shy, my friend?" asked Malyshev with a cheerful smile.

Alimushkin nodded to him, smiled, and with the smile the stiffness and awkwardness of the first minute disappeared.

"Dasha!" called Malyshev towards a side door, and there, on the threshold, Alimushkin saw a still fairly young woman who was looking at him with a pleasant but rather obligatory smile.

She was leaning against the doorpost, in an unbuttoned mid-season coat, evidently light and close-fitting. She had a wide knitted scarf wound round her neck, and the setting April sun lightly gilded her short hair. The more she looked at Alimushkin and smiled, the kinder the round, soft face became, as if she knew what Malyshev was going to ask and what she would say to him about Alimushkin, who frowned against his will, thinking that the academician was indeed an odd one, taking such a young woman as his wife.

"Dasha," said Malyshev, smiling, "come, prophetess, show off, what have you to say about Alimushkin? He's our first guest from over *there*..." he emphasised significantly.

Alimushkin did not fully understand the meaning of that drawled "from over there"; it was presumably connected with a previous conversation

which Alimushkin had not heard, and so he must not mention it out of turn. To Alimushkin, Dasha's surprise seemed affected when she asked:

"Really ... from the Aniva?"

"What did you think, then?" said the old man importantly. "Not *from* the Aniva, *to* the Aniva! Commissar of the entire coastline, from Lake Vachug to the great estuary and the adjacent lands... Is that not so, Comrade Alimushkin?"

As he spoke, Malyshev winked artlessly at Alimushkin and, taking him by the elbow—he could hardly have reached his shoulder—conducted him into the study, saying to Dasha:

"Have you sent a telegram to Basov?"

"Yesterday," she replied.

"Ah, that means he'll fly in tomorrow. I trust him for the time being as I trust myself. He's plucky and straight-forward... As long as that isn't the ruin of him..." He said the last few words in a tone of voice that encouraged conversation, and Alimushkin asked who this Basov was.

"What?" exclaimed Malyshev incredulously. "Oh, yes! You haven't met... Allow me to introduce Nikita Leontievich Basov, your colleague. My pupil... And you know what I regret? We met too late... Or perhaps not," he added to himself, and Alimushkin laughed genially at this forgivable changeability of the old man's thoughts and moods.

On the threshold of Malyshev's study, Alimushkin, as if by a hunch, looked over his shoulder and stayed in that attitude for a moment. Dasha, rosy-cheeked—she had evidently come in only just before him from the biting spring cold outside—was standing in the same attitude, her hands behind her back, looking him intently and thoughtfully in the face and eyes, and her gaze filled him with a vague confusion, and both suddenly understood this.

In Malyshev's spacious study, unbelievably

sunny compared with his own flat on Taganka Square, Alimushkin felt more relaxed and, with a sense of relief incomprehensible to him, sat down opposite Malyshev in a low armchair in front of a little coffee-table. Restrained, as was only right for the first acquaintance, the story of the young scientist carried Alimushkin away; he tried to understand what was most important about him, what Malyshev was so enthusiastic about and, apparently, proud, or perhaps worried. Noticing his interest, Malyshev expanded somewhat.

Taking advantage of a pause in the narrative, Alimushkin commented:

"Tikhon Svetozarovich, according to what you say, the project can't be started without Basov at all! Even so, I think that no one is irreplaceable..."

This was somewhat tactless, but to begin a construction project with the search for irreplaceables is indeed a dangerous thing to do. Here, certainly. And especially in the Arctic...

"Goodness gracious!" said Malyshev, throwing his hands apart and clearly not taking Alimushkin seriously. "Are you sure of that?.. I didn't even suspect it. You look serious and independent... Perhaps you never have doubts?.. That's a rare thing. And when I think you did not come to me from the street... So with whom is such a good man to be replaced!"

Alimushkin flushed, cursing himself for so hastily engaging the old man in a dispute.

"I'm not talking about myself," he said, correcting himself and not noticing that by this ambiguous proviso he was making himself one of the irreplaceables. Malyshev, however, did not try to catch him out. Alimushkin was also embarrassed because the irritation behind Malyshev's smile was refuting his words. He did not want to argue. "If our conversation has taken this turn," continued Alimushkin tensely, "it would be more correct to

say that today classes are irreplaceable: the working class, the peasantry..."

"And the intelligentsia," added Malyshev humorously. "And tomorrow?"

"Social development can change the role of this or that class..."

"Hm, yes, social function!.. However, logic shows," said Malyshev craftily, "that the homogeneous mass consists of homogeneous elements. If a class as a whole is irreplaceable, then each separate representative of that class is too."

"In that case," said Alimushkin, refusing to give in, "it would be more appropriate to talk about the importance of the separately taken, infinitely small elements that make up the whole..."

"Really?" Malyshev was cheered up by their fencing. "But I, forgive me for my sins, always supposed that irreplaceable people exist..." And then more seriously: "Say what you will, Pyotr Evseyevich, but the creative individuality is irreplaceable. The poet, the artist, the scientist—yes! But also the doctor and the engineer! The trouble is that the category of the creative, to our way of thinking, still doesn't include the labour of the fitter, the turner, to say nothing of the baker. And it isn't even a matter of profession, but that acquiring creativeness to us seems a privilege to this day, whereas life itself decisively refutes this. It is reduced to the absurd: no one disputes the claim that the social revolution cannot be accomplished by the powers of a few revolutionaries; there must be a leader, a revolutionary class, but here we have the scientific and technological revolution being laid with thoughtless ease on the shoulders of the scientists, the designers and the engineers. Yet its success also depends on the revolutionary working class. Be it otherwise, the technological revolution cannot progress..."

"We cannot demand of each one..."

"We can and must. Teach and demand!"

"But..."

"Precisely, too many *buts*. And that is exactly why I have not mentioned the respect which each honest working man deserves. That goes without saying... And yet if a rare and irreplaceable worker leaves a tyre repair workshop or a mammoth automated factory, everybody is affected. The first to react is that utilitarian and soulless thing called production. Have I not convinced you?"

"Not quite," admitted Alimushkin.

"Your doubts are to no purpose, Pyotr Evseyevich; it's a fact. Otherwise, why do these football team managers lure a player from one team to another?"

Alimushkin frowned.

"Please," continued Malyshev, not in the least put out, "let's take science! In the main, it takes two kinds of worker: the pure thinker, so to speak, the theoretician, and the practical one. Which do you prefer?"

"I accept them both."

"Then allow me to comment that the highest summits of pure science have been scaled by theoreticians—yes indeed, theoreticians who did not turn up their noses at practical experience. And alongside them were practical scientists who backed their hunches with facts and calculations and who embodied them in entirely concrete things—incandescent lamps, for instance, extra-tough armour plating, accelerators, cybernetic devices. You may ask what is bad about the division of scientists into the 'aristocracy of thought', or as they are called nowadays, 'white-collar workers' and—forgive me for the barbaric word—work horses! I shall tell you, but first allow me one question, Pyotr Evseyevich..."

"If I can answer it..."

"You can, of course! I'll just call Dasha, she's interested in this too."

"By all means," agreed Alimushkin, aware that behind Malyshev's concern lay longing, the desire, concealed under the restlessness, always to have Dasha at his side. It was sentimental, at the same time it was sad—such a difference in their ages...

Malyshev's summons was answered at once, as if she had expected to be called. A short, mauve, tight-fitting apron stressed her sturdy figure, and a matching mauve ribbon was bound over her hair to keep it in place. Dasha put an ashtray down in front of Alimushkin in answer to his unspoken question and returned to the door, meaning to go out; but Malyshev detained her.

"No, Dasha, a moment!.." She stopped. "I'm just asking Pyotr Evseyevich in your presence," he said emphatically, "to give his own image of the scientist... That is," he turned to Alimushkin, "to give the chain of associations called into being by the word 'scientist'!"

Alimushkin nodded his agreement and thought for a moment. Malyshev was silent and so was Dasha. With one glance at her, Alimushkin saw that she was wrapped in her own thoughts, and although she was ready to listen patiently, there was dissatisfaction in the downcast eyes. How fed up she must be with all this! The customary politeness forbids snorting or slamming the door. There she was, watching Alimushkin as, hunched over the low table, he rolled a cigarette in his fingers, with the tobacco grains falling from the palm of his hand into the ashtray. He lit up, drawing the smoke deep into his lungs, and then the first light ash, burned by the match, went into the little red china shoe. However, deep in thought, Alimushkin did not notice that Dasha, the corners of her mouth curved up in the hint of a smile, had folded her arms across her chest as, her fine nostrils quivering, she savoured the sweetish scent of the cigarette smoke. She sensed something good about the pensive Alimushkin. She

almost physically felt Alimushkin upsetting the old ideas; he, of course, was no match for her academician, and she hastened to Alimushkin's aid.

"Perhaps tea," she suggested, "and then we'll talk afterwards."

"No, thanks," replied Alimushkin, drawing on his cigarette again, "I haven't really anything special to say..."

"All the same, all the same," said Malyshev demandingly.

"Well, then," agreed Alimushkin amiably, "when I hear the word scientist, like everyone else I imagine a sage wise in experience, timid, with white hair. Banally eccentric and somewat absent-minded. But a great and secret thought dwells in him. He probably knows nothing of our petty cares. And what are the alarms of ordinary mortals to him? He spends days and nights somewhere in a laboratory, in a garden, in his study, in the old university library. He turns the pages of manuscripts and tattered books in dark covers. He mutters vague words like conjurations... The pen, no doubt a goose-quill at that, squeaks over the paper till dawn... He counts something up, considers, compares drawings, sets up weird experiments... He is surrounded by the glory of the magician and the wizard, and the philistine ridicules the prophet in him. He is truly pathetic—from loneliness, sleeplessness, hard work and emaciation. They frighten children with his exhausted face. And he abides in holiness and believes that tomorrow the molten lead will be transformed by his magic into gold. And ... that day will come," ended Alimushkin suddenly, laughing.

"Why, you're a poet," said Dasha, smiling. But Alimushkin imagined that in her eyes he was a total nonentity.

Malyshev was frowning. But Alimushkin was

more and more taken by Dasha's smile. After a brief pause, he suppressed a sigh and continued with unconcealed irony at himself, at everything he was saying.

"So it was... Years passed... The secret of the world and the stars are open. Machines count a thousand times faster than a thousand alchemists and mathematicians of ancient times. The scientist has become younger too... No doubt he is like your Basov and loves arguing and having fun, but..."

"What but?" Malyshev leaned abruptly towards Alimushkin.

And Alimushkin, his chair creaking, also turned to him and so they eyed each other like goats, not noticing that Dasha, laughing, had slipped out of the room. Alimushkin could not restrain himself and roared with laughter.

"But he has no time for that!.. Either he's building a hydroelectric power station, or he's sitting up nights on end and calculating something again!"

"So what's changed, in essence?" Malyshev wouldn't let up.

"Why, nothing!"

"Exactly, exactly!" Malyshev was satisfied. "Hard labour, voluntary hard labour—that's what being a scientist meant and always will! What d'you have to say, Dasha?.. Oh, where is she? She's flown away." His eyebrows shot up in surprise. He grunted bewilderedly and ended: "That's a woman for you, Pyotr Evseyevich! When she feels she's nearly beaten, she vanishes and her trail is already cold..."

He rose and, half-opening the door, ominously called: "Dasha!"

She replied from a distance with a muffled "Yoo-hoo!" and Malyshev's wrath gave way to indulgence:

"Make us some tea!.. Or would you prefer

coffee?" he asked Alimushkin.

"Tea."

"Then let's have tea, Dasha. You haven't forgotten the brew, have you?"

"I've brought it, I've brought it... I'm pouring it out now!"

Malyshev tugged at his beard and walked up and down pensively, his felt boots gliding over the parquet floor. He went past the bookshelves and stood for a while in front of the map of the Soviet Union. Only then was Alimushkin able to have a good look at the study, with its books, the blue map of the rivers on the wall and the massive oak table at the window opposite, piled with many scripts, magazines and files. A mountain of blueprints and tracings was stacked on the floor behind the table—and he thought how foolish he must have seemed with his story to such a man. It was his good luck that Malyshev didn't take offence easily.

"I think and think about it," Malyshev was saying calmly in the meantime, "but I cannot make sense of it: where does it come from, this extraordinary irresponsibility?" And he explained. "It sometimes seems to me that the young people of today are ready to make fun not only of science, but of all humankind... Just look: the press, the cinema, the radio—how do they portray the scientist?.. A kind of half-athlete, half-hiker, with a guitar and sideburns. Books? Pah! Anachronisms! He doesn't have any. He hasn't even got a library now. And there are stacks of them in the reading-room. But he carries a recording machine, a few Twists on tape—that, it must be supposed, is for inspiration! Not for relaxation, oh no, because he doesn't know the meaning of a real honest days' work. At work he's as free as a bird; he shows up to impress the audience with a brilliant revelation that came to him during his latest world cruise... The genius comes in. He

bows. Takes off black spectacles. Writes a formula on the board, and it's in the bag. He bestows a smile. Applause of the fans and the flashing of cameras. Spectacles on again, and off he goes to have a ball... Eh? What's it all about, Pyotr Evseyevich?"

"I don't agree," objected Alimushkin. "You're exaggerating, Tikhon Svetozarovich. It's all pretence, really, and whenever was there no pretence?"

"You're not exactly reassuring me..."

"But why? Look how many schools we have for gifted childern!"

"Schools? You mean schools for the children of gifted parents?"

Alimushkin laughed, admitting that the old man had won the round this time.

"He hasn't learned to read yet," grumbled Malyshev, "and he's already on the sort list for a school of geniuses... And somewhere the ordinary Kulibins, Nartovs and Lomonosovs[1] are running to the village school... They'll come back from the army and go to a factory or, with luck, into science on extra-mural courses... And what is left for them? They didn't give up their nappies to be recognised as gifted..."

"You're contradicting yourself, Tikhon Svetozarovich. Basov's from the country, and he's not the only one you have!"

"Of course I'm contradicting myself!" smiled the old man contentedly. "But only because such manual labourers in science, such as your humble servant—it's true, I'm too old for such jokes—but such as Basov, should not have it said of them by all and sundry that they're incapable of anything but honest drudgery.

[1] I. P. Kulibin (1735-1818), A. K. Nartov (1693-1756) and M. V. Lomonosov (1711-1765) were distinguished Russian scientists.— *Ed.*

There's a paradox for you! There's your 'whitecollars'!.."

"But how about Basov himself?"

"Do you want complete precision in everything?" said Malyshev, answering question with question.

"If possible."

Malyshev smiled sadly. With this young (he could use the word of Alimushkin) man, undoubtedly no poet and no dreamer, practicality predominated; a capacity of itself not bad and not good. Everything depended rather on the sphere of activity. The future Party Organiser was interested in Malyshev's precise opinion of Basov. Was it possible, in a few words, to fathom a man, when much simpler phenomena cannot be accounted for even by complicated explanations?

"You see," said Malyshev, "there are more elaborate problems than that of the technological revolution. The problem of life, of the peace... Military potential is only a side-effect of the world balance, but existence itself is determined by the struggle of philosophies. What I'm driving at is that it's impossible to confine a man within the bounds of narrow professional activity..."

"He's made his bed, let him lie on it?"

"Yes! Man must think widely! It must not be forgotten that ideas develop both technology and philosophy!"

"It seemed to me," admitted Alimushkin, "that his life has gone wrong somehow..."

"On the contrary! Myself, I blundered into such a jungle out of pure empiricism that if it had't been for Krzhizhanovsky, I don't know how I would have survived... D'you know why? I was seeking! Not a point of rest, but a point for the application of forces, because praise once turned my head. And that's why I'm grateful to Gleb[1]: he

[1] G. M. Krzhizhanovsky.— *Ed.*

took me on and, in the name of the Party, brought me down from heaven to earth. Work, build! We need a canal, we need a dam, we need a production complex... Basov won't be led astray now. But that's what they're trying to do to him, strange to say! Tell me," he suddenly changed the subject, "about yourself, Pyotr Evseyevich—are you only a leader, or can you do something with your own hands?"

"I can," answered Alimushkin smiling. And told Malyshev that once he had worked as a foreman and had graduated from an evening institute...

"So you're by way of being skilled man? Good! Aren't you afraid of being led astray?"

"No."

"Imagine, I had a woman petitioner here recently," he said, knitting his brows and grinning, as if giving Alimushkin time to guess who this woman had been. "Imagine, Basov's wife!.. She took advantage of the fact that he was a long way away just then, on the Kola Peninsula, building a hydraulic power system on the Serebryanka. And his wife is a real Muscovite. Didn't want to go out there, of course, and she's a hydrologist, you know; a hydrologist, but she was so artful that I nearly lost the last few hairs on my head because of what she put me through. You, says she, are an old devil, you have an influence on Nikita. Give him a proper talking-to so that he sits for his doctorate immediately... And what, I ask, will be his subject? That, says she, isn't important, what's important is where! Well then, where? At least, says she, in a department, in your place. It doesn't matter to you, says she, but he needs a launching-pad. And if there isn't one? Then I'll fix him up in an electrical engineering institute, just so long as I get him back here. Well, I say, fiddle-sticks! No, of course, I didn't put it that way, but I gave my word to transfer Basov from the Serebryanka, only I didn't let on where to! Incidentally, are you

married, Pyotr Evseyevich? Wont't you be drawn back from the Aniva? Perhaps it would be better not to get involved before you get your knuckles rapped."

Alimushkin had long since realised that Malyshev's ingenuous cunning and all his analogies would sooner or later be turned against him, and he was ready for the question.

"I'm married," replied Alimushkin. "I was married. Cancer... I've been on my own with my daughter for five years. But my daugther will soon be a mother herself. She's got married. So that..."

Malyshev was silent. Alimushkin himself became curious.

"Excuse me," he said, "your wife—does she go to work or does she keep house?"

Magnified by the spectacle-lenses Malyshev's blue eyes bulged in bewilderment, then he started blinking rapidly and his face was wreathed in smiling wrinkles. He began shaking, silently at first; then he suddenly burst out laughing, breathlessly, tearfully, like an old man.

"Dasha! Dasha! Come here quickly!" he called.

"I'm bringing it, I'm bringing it," she replied, and she must have pushed open the door with her toe, because she was carrying a big floral tray on which stood steaming cups full to the brim and dishes piled with jam and biscuits. Alimushkin hastened to help her.

"Thank you, don't bother," said Dasha, justifying herself. "I can manage, you know."

"No, did you hear what he's been saying, Dasha?" asked Malyshev with a laugh. "He's been marrying you off! How about that! Do I stand a chance, eh?"

Still not fully understanding, Alimushkin bowed his head in confusion. He did not see Dasha blushing gently again. She was looking at them both indulgently, as adults look at small conspirators, but Malyshev continued:

"He's decided that you're my wife!"

Dasha straightened her shoulders.

"It's not surprising," she said calmly. "You have no one to blame but yourself. You could have introduced me, Father..."

She offered Alimushkin her hand.

"Dasha," she smiled, and, not noticing his stiffness, continued more mildly: "Darya Tikhonovna, daughter of this crazy academician... And I'm not a housekeeper," she sighed, "I'm a journalist, but such a bad one that my father sometimes gets confused over my concoctions..."

"I've not read anything of yours..." confessed Alimushkin so earnestly that Dasha burst out laughing.

Alimushkin imagined he saw something like the earlier expression in her widely-spaced eyes; there was a kind of masterfulness in them; or was it, perhaps, just professional interest and curiosity? In any case, there was an unmistakable resemblance to Malyshev's eyes, and he felt annoyed with himself for not noticing this before.

They drank tea with rum, and Malyshev talked about the Aniva, but imperceptibly the conversation came round to Dasha. Distracting her father's attention, she resorted to cunning, pouring into his cup no more than two aromatic drops as if it were a medicine. Malyshev kept covertly jogging her elbow to make her pour more, but it didn't work. Enjoing the relaxed atmosphere, Alimushkin laughed with them and realised how necessary father and daughter were to one another. His own relations with his daughter were different. It was too late to have regrets: nothing could be changed in his life nor in Sonya's. She had left, and another man was now her guide and mentor.

Carried away by Dasha's account, Alimushkin was imperceptibly drawn into, if not the problems, at least the elementary tasks of hydroelectric engineering, beyond which, as Dasha said joking-

ly, lay the alluring prospect for him of being a pioneer of Arctic energy development. He did not take offence. Why not dream? Picking up the echo of Dasha's words, Alimushkin could clearly see in his mind's eye the lacework masts over the snowy wilderness, the rime-covered cables, the intense darkness of the Arctic night quivering in the blinding discs of searchlight suns, and somewhere away from the Aniva, in the depths of the mountains, monitors at work and mine ventilators humming. There would have to be a moment when, in the generator room of the hydroelectric station, he would see the high-voltage needle tremble for the first time.

"Just imagine how rich the northern region is!" said Malyshev with animation. "Three quarters of the country's deposits of coal are out there! And almost as much natural gas. And the nickel, copper and manganese! And the reserves of hydroelectric power are virtually inexhaustible!"

And, mentally repeating after Malyshev, "...the Aniva hydroelectric station will be a tiny dot, like a grain of millet on the map of the Soviet Union, but the ear of ripe corn will be much more weighty," Alimushkin decided that this must be remembered at all costs.

"It's my last brain-child," continued Malyshev, "and I very much want it to be beautiful." He smiled sadly at Alimushkin. "That also will depend on you."

Dasha handed Alimushkin a big file from her father's desk containing the sheets of the Aniva blueprints. Under the cover there was a chance (or perhaps not!) page inscribed with some verse that Alimushkin had taken as an epigraph; it was so appropriate to everything that Malyshev had been discussing:

Oh, I would live life to extremes,
Eternalise all that's essential,

Make human everything impersonal,
Fulfill all unaccomplished dreams![1]

"Dasha's work!" commented Malyshev, meaning that she had copied them out.

"What of it?" she objected. "I seek the poetic equivalents for father's work." And she added a comment of her own: "Father has caused such a furore with the Aniva that Moscow is flabbergasted."

"All Moscow?" laughed Alimushkin.

"Of course. Fancy asking!.."

"Aha!" replied Malyshev, with a cunning glance at Dasha. "And they've assigned funds to us!"

And to Alimushkin:

"The first expedition is flying out in not more than a month's time. With full equipment and supplies. Pyotr Evseyevich, I would like you and Basov to prepare it. The nucleus must consist of specialists and enthusiasts. Conditions in the Arctic—climate, no roads, darkness, inconvenience caused by inadequate supplies, isolation from the mainland—all demand an exacting selection of personnel, so there must be no one over forty. The construction project will take several years; it will be necessary for people to go and live out there! How old are you, by the way?"

"I'll fit into the stipulations," joked Alimushkin, "if you don't postpone the final date."

"You may be sure of that! At present, it's important to establish a base on the Aniva, prepare the sites, the jetties, the roads, living accommodation and storehouses. There will be a lot of work, and there's no sense in sending hundreds of people to a wilderness. In summer, the tundra is soggy, just one huge bog. The sooner the base is expanded..."

"I understand," interrupted Alimushkin. "It

[1] Alexander Blok.— *Tr.*

won't take me long to pack."

"Well then, Pyotr Evseyevich," and Malyshev was silent for a moment, his eyes shining animatedly behind his spectacles, "shall we shake hands on it?"

"I was thinking," said Dasha, smiling. "Shouldn't I go?"

"You shall be my authorised representative," said Malyshev, joking his way out of it. "The boys'll get out of hand there, they'll start fooling about, they'll say the old man's a long way off, he can't see what we're doing here, let's have things our own way! Pyotr Evseyevich, don't pretend afterwards that you don't know she has authority!"

Standing by the window with her back to them, Dasha was silent. Tikhon Svetozarovich went up to her, touched her on the shoulder and began to discuss something quietly, looking into his daughter's eyes. It wouldn't do to bother them, and it was time anyway: dusk was already thickening into night, cool, feebly lit by the tall street-lamps.

Without saying goodbye, Alimushkin left them; but in the hall, where no one had thought of putting on the light, he bumped into something in the dark and knocked over some skis that fell down with a clatter... Startled by the unprecedented noise in their flat, Malyshev and Dasha ran out to him.

"This," sighed Alimushkin repentantly, "is called leaving without saying goodbye."

Dasha shook her head, smiled, sighed and said to Malyshev:

"Father, I'll see Pyotr Evseyevich off."

They went downstairs in silence and walked outside, with Alimushkin wondering all the time how to address her: Dasha? Darya Tikhonovna?

Her brows slightly knitted, she looked at him and solved his difficulties for him by asking simply:

"Alimushkin... Is it all right for me to call you that? You have a nice surname!"

"For God's sake!" he blurted out with relief. It was a weight off his mind.

"Excellent!" She took him by the arm, a cunning smile playing on her lips.

Dasha was wearing a green autumn coat and was carrying long, elegant kid gloves. To Alimushkin, those gloves seemed to belong to an alien and inaccessible world. He hunched his shoulders. In his light, far from new nylon raincoat, he looked somewhat plain beside her. Too plain, even. Feeling this, Alimushkin, as he humbly walked along with Dasha, was feverishly trying to find a pretext to say goodbye as quickly as possible and get away.

How was he to know that the somewhat rational Dasha, surprisingly for herself, found Alimushkin attractive? She liked his big, brown eyes. All evening she had covertly been watching him, amused by his manner of knitting his remarkably mobile brows and talking at times with such argumentative candour that his voice began to vibrate with tension, as if it was the only way he had of proving that he was right. But behind Alimushkin's fervour, Dasha sensed an ability to understand the other's train of thought and not to disturb it, a quality, in her opinion, so rare in men that it could not go unnoticed.

It was hard to get Alimushkin to look at her—not that he was turning his eyes away—no, but when he looked at her, it was as if he did not see or notice her attitude, her attentiveness towards him, which was restrained, needless to say. And yet there were one or two moments when his eyes were defenceless, with the sadness in them usual with people who have suffered grief and are trying to hide it. She wanted to understand him, but she already felt that for all his forty years, there was still much of the unexpended

affection and goodness in Alimushkin that was so missing in her own life, and much simple, friendly sympathy too. She regarded this as her own little discovery, and thought sadly that a person never loses anything so often and with so little regret in youth as the possibility of happiness.

Dasha sometimes flummoxed Alimushkin with questions that took him completely by surprise.

"Aren't you afraid of me, Alimushkin?" she once said suddenly and laughed, not letting him answer, guessing that she had hit the mark. He was not afraid of her, he found her interesting; but what was he to do if the distraction on his face betrayed his shyness and confusion.

"Tell me, Alimushkin," she asked him, "what was she like, your wife?"

In this way, little by little, Dasha was getting to know him, even when he was awkwardly silent or fended her off with abstractions; but thinking about his wife Masha, perhaps for the first time in many years, he did not feel bitter, realising that the past cannot be returned. Had he loved Masha very much? He did not know, but he had loved her and had never been attracted by other women. He had always remembered Masha as small and frail, like a little girl. The thought of her aroused long-forgotten feelings and sensations. He did not compare his wife with Dasha, but he was now remembering more and more frequently how he used to escort Masha from her women's hostel to a birch-wood beyond Izmailovskoye, and her hair, soft as silk, was fragrant with lily of the valley perfume and a faint whiff of lime—it took a long time to leave the hair of the girl decorators after whitewashing. He and Masha delayed their wedding, hoping for a new flat. Masha did not want to go to his "dungeon with windows facing a blank wall," as she put it, but Sonya made them get a move on. No doubt he should have kept quiet about all this, but for some reason he couldn't,

and the strangest thing of all was that Dasha patiently heard him out and seemed to understand. She understood him rightly.

Alimushkin braced himself and held his head up beside Dasha and his head began to whirl with crazy thoughts that had nothing directly to do with Dasha; but it occurred to him that if he looked at it sensibly, then he was not old yet, he could still do a hand-stand—he poked fun at himself to justify the ferment of his blood. But he really did want to grow younger, which was probably why he had recently been stooping less and had even been exercising with dumbbells in the morning so as not to cut a poor figure in front of the lads on the Aniva.

...Before he left for the Aniva, Alimushkin was very busy, but in the evenings he invariably turned up at the Malyshevs. The flat had become a kind of headquarters where he and Basov, who had flown in from the Kola Peninsula, discussed all the plans. Most important of all, they could not cope without Malyshev's help, advice and authority, especially when a snap decision had to be made at high level. True, they did not bother him with minor details—here, Dasha came to the rescue.

"You just give me the phone number and name of that bureaucrat," she would say with assumed severity, "who is able but doesn't want to solve your problem..."

"Really, Dasha," Alimushkin distractedly threw his hands apart, "you're behaving just as if you were back in the office..."

"Hm!" she replied condescendingly to him and dialled the required number. "Hullo? Ignat Ivanovich? This is Academician Malyshev's secretary..."

"Oh, Pyotr, we could do with a secretary like that for the Aniva!" said Basov with a wink and Dasha covered the mouthpiece of the telephone

with her hand, put her finger to her lips and whispered:

"Shh! Quiet! I'd be no use to you on the Aniva, you haven't got any telephones there yet..."

Alimushkin secretly dreaded the parting with Dasha, since he already had a presentiment that he was going to think about her on the Aniva.

While Dasha had been getting to know almost everything about him, down to his unsuccessful attempt at flight from the factory school to go to the front in the spring of 1945, she said little about herself, and only from Nikita's and her own casual half-jesting, half-earnest admissions did Alimushkin guess that her life since childhood had worked out erratically, there had been ups and downs, weird crazes, all acceptable if one remembered that Dasha had lost her mother early.

During their last evening together, when they were out for a stroll in Moscow, Dasha confessed that at one stage she had become keenly interested in philosophy and there had even been a goal: to achieve the total emancipation of women! Alimushkin would not have taken any notice of this, but she said it so eloquently—emancipation!—that it was as if the glass panes of a broken lamp were glittering in front of him. There was so much bitterness and mockery in her voice. Old and still remembered sufferings had come to the surface.

It was damp, slushy, chilly spring weather, typical of Moscow. A boisterous wind seemed to be circling endlessly round the Garden Ring, dispersing the few late-night pedestrians. Dasha straightened her wind-blown hair and Alimushkin timidly suggested returning home, but Dasha declined. She was noticeably agitated, and Pyotr did not guess that this was the very day she wanted to tell him everything; she began to speak and suddenly stopped in mid-word, afraid that he wouldn't understand her.

She spoke hurriedly and got into a muddle. First about her father, then about herself, then again about his "chronicle"—his dairies, which she was helping Malyshev to copy out, and this conversation at first was like the run up to a jump, when Dasha, recoiling from the "alluring ideas" of the emancipated woman, now talked and talked about herself without respite, until she ended with the sad confession that all her torments, all her appeals—down with potties and nappies!—had been a terrible and futile waste of her life.

"How foolish, really! How annoying..." thought Alimushkin. He nearly said it aloud, but Dasha's distraught, still flushed face was so pure and unclouded that only now did he understand how relieved and good she felt as a result of her confession.

It was, in a final analysis, not a matter of emancipation, but that Dasha did not know how to live. She had been flitting from flower to flower like a butterfly, not worried by anything and not really thinking about how other women lived, other women, for whom things are far from pleasant at times because of hard work. The mill-girl at Ivanovo had rightly told Dasha, "You're not used to a woman's lot..."

Dasha stayed with her for several days, took a good look at her, then asked her, "What should I do, then?" "Do?" replied the other, grinning. "You must work, bear children and raise them. Don't think about yourself, but about how to swell the population. What else?"

They had long since arrived at her house and had gone into the empty doorway where there was no wind, where the radiator was buzzing thinly like mosquito; and there was a smell of conifer branches left by someone on a window-sill. Without noticing Dasha's silence, Alimushkin thought that her confession was more than a confession of mistakes, and that it could not be

otherwise, and their meeting was bound to have taken place sooner or later, and this evening, and everything that had been in him before and had changed in him towards Dasha had become clearer, more understandable, more definite. He did not yet know exactly what had happened, but the word fell from his lips in spite of himself:

"Daria..."

Dasha trembled, knowing that this was not a slip of the tongue; he was, as it were, bestowing a new name on her, expressing affection, and tenderness, and respect, and something else that was from him only and was meant for her.

"Daria," he repeated more boldly, "you don't know how..."

He put out his hand to touch her hair, but Dasha blushed and suddenly ran away, her heels clattering up the stairs.

"Dasha!" he called distractedly. "Come and visit us! You must come to the Aniva... I shall be waiting for you!"

She answered him from above, but the echo in the staircase spaces muddled the sounds; he could only hear his surname and he gathered that Dasha would be coming. Yes, she would be coming... Otherwise she would not have laughed so merrily, shyly and, as it seemed to him, happily.

Alimushkin flew to the Aniva with a light heart. He was not afraid of the future, however difficult it might be.

When discussing History and the difficult destinies of peoples, we rightly call events historical that for a long time remain instructive to many people. Our affairs and the days we live through inescapably recede from the present into the past: nevertheless, if not all of them are subjected to oblivion, then it means there is a certain law in the fact that even habitual, routine work, not marked at present by special recognition, will be ap-

preciated differently, more highly, tomorrow and its significance fully determined only as it recedes from us to a sufficient distance in time. This law is determined by the meaning of existence, by the goal of human activity, and Mikhail Lomonosov was, of course, right when he wrote:

"It is a great cause by mortal and transient toil to give immortality to many people, to preserve the due glory of praiseworthy deeds and, conveying past achievements into posterity and into the depths of eternity, to join those whom nature has separated by remoteness in time."

It sometimes happened that work in the project became hectic, but the Barakhsanites did not like that word. After the advance team arrived on the Aniva and settled in the locality, the bridgehead had to be expanded. Necessity enforced the rapid construction of living accommodation, the building of roads, the laying of foundations for the ancillary enterprises, the preparing of the sites for the main installations; and in order to cope with all this in the brief Arctic summer, they had to follow cruel schedules. The working hours were extended not by one or two, but to the limit of human endurance. It was necessary; and the engineers, the foremen, the excavator and bulldozer operators and the drivers—all temporarily became loaders, masons, diggers, carpenters or lumbermen. But they coped.

Building the winter road from Barakhsan to the Aniva estuary proved more difficult; here, everything depended not on numbers, but on skill and on experience of Arctic expeditions which the Barakhsan team did not have. Heavy cargo vessels were no longer sailing to the Rapids along the Aniva, shallow since the middle of summer. To wait for the next navigational season meant to be left for the winter without equipment, building materials, fuel and food. From a nail to a postage stamp, Barakhsan obtained everything from the

mainland. And although aircraft could still supply the town with food, it was not only expensive and risky to ferry cumbersome equipment by air, it was often simply impossible. After discussing several options, the builders settled for one: while navigation was still in progress on the Yenisei, the cargoes for Barakhsan were to be off-loaded in the Aniva estuary. In winter, when the surface was frozen hard, a road would be built to the estuary.

Flying over the future route at the end of summer, Basov and Alimushkin could not help feeling alarmed when they looked at the bald, clay-coloured hills criss-crossed with an elaborate network of innumerable streams. But the feeling of danger was somewhat alleviated from a great height: the tundra lakes glittered calmly, the sides of the ravines and gullies were not so intimidatingly steep. Finally, they thought, the streams would freeze up and the snow would even out the banks. The higher they climbed, the more finite was the distance, and the direct route from Barakhsan to the estuary seemed shorter and, perhaps easier, and if at that moment they had had the necessary equipment available, they would have started on it the very next day... Over two hundred kilometres seemed, by local scales, an insignificant distance.

It was considered indisputable that the route would run straight as an arrow, along the right bank, almost halving the distance compared with the ice route along the Aniva. The advantage in distance was particularly important, since it meant a direct gain in time. Moreover, lorries could run over the tundra up to two weeks before the rivers became ice-bound. Mainly volunteer drivers went out to build the winter road. The make-up of the team was confirmed by recommendation of the Komsomol Committee, but Basov warned Silin as chief mechanic:

"Bear in mind that you're answerable with your neck for each driver."

There were many who wanted to work on the route, and Silin questioned each with a partiality and passion which even his fellow-drivers did not expect of him.

Silin already knew the most reliable and experienced lads; he looked out for them and rubbed his neck with pleasure when they showed up and their answer, "But I'm a Komsomol..." to his enquiring, "So what are you?" fully satisfied the chief mechanic. But when the hulking Borodulin showed up in his office, Silin could not resist a sly dig at him.

"So, Alekha, you're in the Komsomol, too?"

"That's not the point, Gavrila Panteleimonovich. You know me, after all, and I'd come in handy. I can cope with any lorry, right?"

"We'll give you a bulldozer, it's less worry. How about that, eh?"

"No use... If a bulldozer goes into a hole, its tracks get stripped on the ice. Panic—how are we going to rivet them? It can't be done..."

That was absolutely true. A reserve man with Borodulin's strength would be an asset on the road. It could well happen that the lorries had to be manhandled out of a hole, but he didn't feel safe with Borodulin, not at all... Gavrila Panteleimonovich remembered the day when he turned up in the office pre-fab. Not recruited and not posted—self-propelled, as his kind are called.

Broad-shouldered, barrel-chested, cloth cap awry. Slapped an application down on the desk: "Please give me an excavator."

"You a driver?" asked Silin.

"Second class. I've done the Moscow-Crimea-Moscow run; tomatoes, fruit..."

"Know anything about concrete?"

"I know about everything, chief, except haemorrhoids, and I could build the whole of your station on my own..."

"What's the problem?"

"We won't agree on the money."

"How much are you asking?"

"Three thou for starters."

He had known men who had not agreed to "how much will you give", but justified themselves, only they behaved more modestly.

"There aren't any excavators," he replied thoughtfully to Borodulin. "By the way, d'you like a noggin?"

"I've been known to," admitted Alexei amiably, "but your beer stocks aren't big enough for me to knock my cab over."

"Have you tried it?"

"I was joking. A tumbler of the hard stuff instead of anti-freeze to stop the engine seizing up in the cold—that's allowable."

"He's a tight one," thought Silin. "He won't cough up more than a ruble. But we need excavator men..." So he said:

"I'll give you a MAZ or a KrAZ to be going on with. And when the excavators arrive, we'll see..."

Borodulin thought for a moment.

"That won't work, chief," he said with a sigh. "Shelve the application so that the place is reserved... But don't you give me a MAZ. It's a clumsy devil. I've seen ZILs here doing nothing, hardly anyone wants them. They all want the big stuff..."

"What do you stand to gain out of it, my friend?" Silin was baffled.

"The ZIL's harmless, it doesn't play tricks, you can put any kiddo in one, he spends a day scratching behind his ear and hey presto, you've got a crack driver. I'm just telling you that," he added laughing, "so that you won't say you can't replace me..."

"We've got an artful one here," thought Silin, shaking his head, but he kept the application and pushed it under the glass desk-top.

"Chief," said Borodulin with a grin, "after I get my first pay, there'll be a bunch of roses on that worm-eaten desk of yours..."

Silin kept an eye on the way he handled the ZIL. He managed fine. He didn't drink, or, at any rate, his breath didn't smell on the road. But what disconcerted Silin was that he kept his incredible promise. And he put the roses there. An elegant bouquet! People even came over from the left bank to drop in on Silin and have a look at the living flowers. And he couldn't hold out against the women concrete workers from Nadia Kapustina's team. They sighed, they swooned, they had rosebud lips themselves, and they said to him, the little hussies:

"Uncle Gavrila, dear! But your roses'll smell of petrol..."

He waved his hand:

"Help yourselves!"

They all pestered him to find out where he got them from and how, but he didn't even know. A mystery! True, he and Borodulin did not become friends after that. Silin asked him once, offering him a cigarette:

"Alyosha, they're babbling that you're rather good at moonlighting. But we haven't got private operators here. Why do they keep saying that about you?"

Borodulin was not expecting such an approach from Silin, and he told him as much straightaway, spat juicily and ground out his cigarette-end with his boot.

"Well?" grinned Silin.

"So they've reported me already! Riff-raff!" Borodulin was cursing someone unknown. "First they ask a favour and then they shop you."

"Who are you getting at?"

"Who?.. The Ancillary Enterprises Management."

This management was responsible for the output

of the concrete works, for which it had at its disposal about twenty tip-up lorries. But the plant was running erratically, and it so happened that when there was concrete ready, there were no lorries, and when the lorries were available, there was no concrete. The organisation's dispatchers managed to get hold of tip-up lorries from the other sectors and extricated themselves from the jam that way, but they made out the pay-slips to the drivers for their own accounts office.

"Well," sighed Silin, unable to hold back an acid smile, "in that way we'll leap ahead to communism faster."

"For communism, Gavrila Panteleimonovich, I'll say nothing," said Alexei, offended. "It's not for us to live in it and to argue the whys and wherefores. It's as if I was a muzhik, and you were a peasant woman, and we were sitting on the stove and beating about the bush..."

"How so? Don't you know what you want, then?"

"I do know... But I'll put it differently. Maybe I'm not mature enough for communism yet, so that's why I don't touch it. But I'm not interfering either."

"What's wrong with you? Short of a tenner for complete social awareness? Then I'll give you one!"

"Stop getting at me... I don't aim to crook my last on the permafrost; I'm too young yet. As for the tenner... I'll tell you what Karl Marx said: "The proletariat sells its labour'. Understand? I sell my wares without any hanky-panky, but I consider where's plus, and where's minus, and where it's a fair deal, and then I think to myself: work like an ace, Alyosha!"

"Is that going to be your long-term target?"

"I'll push my savings up to five figures, and then we'll see!"

Borodulin seemed to be playing it crafty, but he

wasn't shamming and, in preparing for the route, he had already calculated that he would clock up a thousand in road money—there'd be four figures to his credit. With those calculations, he wasn't going to take a risk for nothing...

Observing that Silin was thinking it over, Borodulin did not feel shy about reminding him at that moment, as about a debt.

"Gavrila Panteleimonovich, I gave you some roses after all... And what roses! Straight from the land of People's Bulgaria."

"I bet that means you want a new ZIL, then," said Silin, disconcerted.

"No-o-o, I'll stick to the one I've got. It's broken in, it's used to the cold."

Silin liked that. A blunderer would have seized the opportunity and said, "Give me one!"

"He's got guts," he approved somewhat doubtfully, and suddenly agreed. "Alright, you devil, off you go! Hit the road! You'll bring up the rear of the convoy."

Not counting the bulldozer, eighteen lorries went on the trip. The chief of the detachment was engineer Ivanetsky and his deputy was Viktor Snegirev, one of the advance team. Before the project, Ivanetsky had been working in a land reclamation management somewhere, but here they kept shoving him from pillar to post, and he was beefing all over the place about not being given a decent job. According to him, the "old hands" of the advance team had seized power, wouldn't let anyone else in, and he wouldn't be averse to warming his hands at a bit of glory either.

Basov didn't like that kind of talk.

"You think it's easy?" he asked Ivanetsky, hiding the fact that he was already fed up to the teeth with him.

"We'll cope no worse than the others," promised Ivanetsky.

"Watch it," warned Nikita. "You're going as a volunteer, not compulsorily."

...Every day reports came in from Ivanetsky over the radio that they had done eight, ten or sometimes six kilometres. The pace was tolerable, although in Barakhsan they had planned fifteen to twenty kilometres per day and night at least, but the boys out on the job saw better and nobody wasn't grumbling at them for the time being. Furthermore, on the second day of the trip they lost a bulldozer. "Alyosha was right." The chief mechanic bitterly recalled Borodulin's words but he said nothing. How could anyone be to blame? The streams were freezing up and there were gaps under the ice; you couldn't see whether it was a big drop or a small one.

However, things subsequently got even worse.

Towards evening, all who were controlling the expedition assembled at the radio station in order to get the first-hand news from the road. The first to arrive would be Anya Odarchenko, followed by Silin and Korostylev, Alimushkin, another two or three, and Basov would show up at the very last moment, when the radio operator behind his wooden grille was winding up reception. Without their report, he could already see from the faces of the group—they looked as if they had just read a death notice—that something was wrong on the road again. Each day lorries went out of action—one, then sometimes even two...

"Impossible repair broken-down lorries on way," radioed Ivanetsky. "Rough terrain forcing us..."

"Ivanetsky'll be putting up lorries instead of sign-posts," joked Korostylev callously. "We'll have to fit out a second convoy."

"I'll go!" said Anya ahead of everybody.

"As my deputy," agreed Korostylev.

Basov maintained a glum silence.

"Did we start out too early, perhaps?" wondered

Silin. "We could have done with more snow..."

On the fifth day, at the appointed hour, the detachments' transmitter did not make contact. Oh, well, something could have gone wrong with their transmitter. The Barakhsanites, who had been getting the news of the expedition from the local radio, asked one another: "Has anyone heard what's the matter?" And again a queue of volunteers wanting to go to the rescue either on lorries or on skis rolled up to Silin and to the YCL Committee.

Twenty-four hours later, a radio signal arrived that completely baffled everyone, especially Alimushkin: "Send a helicopter for Ivanetsky. We've covered seventeen kilometres. Head of Detachment Borodulin. Commissar Snegirev." The radio operator added that the day before, he had been tinkering with the radio all evening.

On reading this postscript to the report, Basov smiled.

"A weight off our shoulders..."

"What does it mean, Nikita? What are you so pleased about?" asked Alimushkin.

"If they've been tinkering, that means things are all right. What else could it mean?"

"Why Borodulin? If Ivanetsky's gone sick, it ought to be Snegirev..."

"But why?"

"The lad's all right," explained Silin of Borodulin. "A veteran. I sent him to bring up the rear... Have they turned back already? That would be something!"

No one was amused by these jokes.

"We must fly out," decided Alimushkin. "Send for the helicopter anyway..." Then, to the radio operator: "Ask where they'll be expecting us."

They answered from the road a minute later: on the seventy-fourth kilometre of the plotted route.

"Where?" All present were astounded.

"That's your answer for you," said Silin. "What a man he is, that Alyosha Borodulin."

"It's not a matter of kilometres," announced Basov with excessive gravity in order to conceal his delight. "They haven't lost a single lorry in twenty-four hours, or even in forty-eight! Pyotr Evseyevich, you're always egging us on to push forward the young, the personnel with initiative. If Borodulin deserves it, will you make it worth his while?"

"We must see..."

"We'll see all right, that's what I said. Not wait a month till you come back from a seminar. You're flying after all..."

"And I wanted to forget," said Alimushkin, laughing. "All right, I'm not against it on principle... But the seminar can wait a day or two. Let's fly to the road together."

To Alimushkin, when he flew there with Basov, the seventy-fourth kilometre, at which it had been arranged to meet, seemed more of a misunderstanding, a kind of leap-frog with number—after the first three or four days crawling like a tortoise over the tundra, the detachment's sudden dash forward was very conspicuous. The fifty-fourth kilometre, more likely? And the fact that Borodulin alone seemed to have scored rather a lot of successes. They had at least stopped leaving lorries behind as sign-posts.

Even from the terse radio signals of the first few days, Alimushkin realised that the men were run down and tired. They had needed reserves of energy for such a spurt. Where had it come from?

The helicopter was heading due west—north-west and low enough over the tundra for the abandoned vehicles to be seen on the road. They circled over the first, and the second. There was no one in sight. But the grey-green tarpaulin-covered

iron boxes, alone amidst the dismal silence of the tundra, were a depressing sight. How could they? They could have stayed there, perhaps, but what could have been the point? It was now the worry of the breakdown team, and that would be when the winter route had been opened...

The sky suddenly became thickly overcast, the clouds were grazing over the plain, visibility was nil...

"To the seventy-fourth or the fiftieth—which?" the pilot asked Basov.

"If we go to the seventy-fourth, will we miss the fiftieth?"

"It's easy to get lost in this visibility, and we haven't enough fuel. We don't know how many times we'll have to circle before we find them, and then we've got to get back to base..."

"Then let's fly as arranged."

The helicopter gained height, but the clouds did not thin out. The helicopter was being rocked and buffeted by a strong side-wind. It was piercingly cold. It would be easy to miss the string of vehicles in the growing darkness and flares could go unnoticed.

"Look through the port-hole!" shouted Basov to the young woman doctor. "Watch out for flares!" He himself went to the port-hole on the other side with Alimushkin.

They spotted the faint flashes, like expiring match flames, at the seventy-fifth kilometre, if the instruments were to be believed. The pilot brought the machine down, almost flying blind, at the intersection of the short flare signals. The landing was suitable; the powdery snow was not deep; but, to the amazement of the people in the helicopter, on jumping down they saw that the propeller was only a hand's breadth short of the last lorry in the column.

"A close shave," commented the helicopter pilot. "We could have wrecked the machine."

The doctor went to examine the sick man. Basov and Alimushkin greeted the members of the expedition and went off with Viktor Snegirev, who had met them, to the commander's cabin. From a few sentences and from the joyful faces of the now somewhat bearded drivers, it could be seen that they were in a cheerful mood. Alimushkin complimented Viktor, who was visibly excited.

"Well done! Keep it up!.. Borodulin, after watch, no doubt?"

"Yes, he's waiting in the van."

"What's wrong with Ivanetsky?" Basov, climbing up into the trailer, threw the question into the open door, and Borodulin, assuming that the question had been addressed to him, replied as he rose to meet the visitors:

"Ivanetsky went sick when the bulldozer went down, and then another two lorries got left behind—one with seized-up bearings, the other lost its clutch..." He grinned, letting himself be scrutinised, and was the first to extend a huge hand to Basov. "How d'you do, Nikita Leontievich! I'm Borodulin, Alexei Borodulin..."

"How d'you do, Borodulin! I know your face, but not much else about you..." Scrutinising the self-styled head of the expedition, Nikita gripped his hand. "Now, what's this self-appointed management of yours? How are things? Tell me, don't be scared!" And he looked at Snegirev, then fleetingly at Alimushkin. Had he begun too stiffly?

Snegirev flushed and transferred his embarrassed gaze to Borodulin, who was amiable but restrained with Basov there watching.

"Don't you get flustered, Commissar," said Borodulin encouragingly to Snegirev. "It's none of your fault. Tell the chiefs everything that happened. If you catch me on the raw somewhere, don't be scared. I won't make a fuss. Just what happened, the truth. The truth—that's the road we have in common," he added, and Alimushkin

had the impression that this sentence had been rehearsed beforehand. He sat down and withdrew into himself, his whole manner showing that he was no longer a participant in the conversation, just a listener.

"You're an independent sort of fellow, Borodulin," commented Alimushkin, unable to restrain himself.

"That's the way I am," agreed the other expressionlessly, and he nodded to Snegirev. "Come on, Vitya, get going, they're waiting."

"I'll begin with myself," sighed Snegirev, awkwardly settling himself at the wooden table opposite Basov, "I'm commissar now, as you see. But from the very start I acted wrongly, I played for time, which is why I didn't help Ivanetsky in time. I wasn't able..."

"From the beginning, Viktor, not the middle," requested Basov. He unbuttoned his sheepskin coat and quickly rubbed the bridge of his nose.

The youngest of the advance team, Snegirev was not the oldest even now. In sending him on the expedition, neither Basov nor Silin nor Alimushkin, who had a weakness for Snegirev, had doubted that his pioneer's toughness, his drive and his early revealed capacity to lead would be particularly valuable out here. But ever since the arrival of the advance team, Alimushkin had spotted another trait in Snegirev, and a disarming one—the merciless directness and sincerity with which Snegirev reacted about himself. How and when he had developed this quality no one knew; but he could own up to his mistakes without degrading himself, and not everyone is capable of that. Perhaps, consequently realising that mistakes are probably unavoidable at the age of twenty, Alimushkin, looking at the blushing Snegirev, was already prepared to forgive him.

...When the bulldozer went out of action on

Sigovyi Stream, followed by three lorries one after another, Ivanetsky suggested going back to reform and supplement the convoy before it was too late. Snegirev was ashamed at the idea; he guessed that the other men in the detachment would support him and he disagreed. It was out of the question. Barakhsan needed that road, and now they were going to gad about all over the place...

"Very well," said Ivanetsky, "let's carry on. But I can't leave new lorries under the snow. I haven't the right. The drivers will have to stay. We'll send a radio signal, the breakdown gang'll come, you'll hand over your wagons, and go back to Barakhsan together."

A wry little laugh ran round the drivers.

"What are we, marmots or something?" asked someone. "And what can a gang do in this weather? Supposing there's a blizzard all of a sudden! The snow'll pile up so high you won't even find anything with a mine-detector afterwards."

"I haven't the right," answered Ivanetsky stiffly.

"Hark at him! He can't leave the lorries, but he can leave people stranded..."

"What use is that equipment going to be?" interjected Borodulin. "Are polar bears going to ride on it, or what?" And to the others: "Don't agree, my lads, you'll freeze on your own like sandpipers in a swamp... He'll be all right, though..."

Ivanetsky went off the handle.

"I'm taking you off the expedition, Borodulin. For corrupting the collective and undermining authority..."

Borodulin did not wait for him to finish.

"You're a fool, Comrade Ivanetsky," he said quietly, but distinctly. "I know this tundra like the back of my hand. And you? How far d'you think you'll get without me?"

Little by little, tempers rose, but they stopped squabbling. The boys went glum and clammed up, not so much because of that disagreement as because of the uncertainty. They were all right themselves, but the lorries were getting jittery. First one would pack up, then the other. They could see no end to the road—forty kilometres plus so far, but the lorries were breaking down. No one was panicking yet, but the drivers, so keen a week ago, felt disgruntled. They were all going around as if their hopes had been dashed. If you looked hard at them, there was doubt in the eyes of each one. "No, we won't make it."

Ivanetsky issued a new order:

"Travel light, nothing is to be taken from the abandoned lorries!"

And then Borodulin acted again: at his own risk, he off-loaded food, firewood and petrol on to the other lorries. Seeing that the comrades were in two minds about it, Snegirev helped him. Ivanetsky charged up to them, beside himself with rage.

"Borodulin!" he yelled, "Borodulin!"

He was as white as chalk and trembling all over. But Borodulin merely smiled.

"Get away, stop bothering me. I'm bringing up the rear. I'm not behind... What d'you want?" And he threatened Ivanetsky, "Or else I'll pin your foot under my wheel!"

On the fourth or fifth day, Snegirev found himself "horseless"—his engine seized up. He would not have been averse to staying with his lorry, but Ivanetsky too was depressed by now. The column started skidding on almost level ground and stopped, as if by order. The word got round that if Ivanetsky was ill, it meant the helicopter would come. Snegirev was his deputy. What would he say? Would he send half of the detachment back or leave it?

Snegirev found nothing better than to ask the assembled men:

"D'you trust me? Say what you think."

It was clear what this was leading up to: put a finger in his mouth and he'd bite your arm off. The deputy still hadn't proved himself. Or maybe they were thinking that to be appointed is one thing and to be elected is another entirely. They said nothing. Snegirev was young and there were older people than him. Ivanetsky had been bearded, but even he... Borodulin finally spoke up, as if hammering in nails.

"You're a good lad, Snegirev, but you're not firm enough. And where's your authority now? You've scuppered your lorry, and there's nothing worse than a driver without a lorry!" He was silent for a moment and finally drove the last nail home. "Ivanetsky squashed you."

"True," admitted Snegirev. "But it's the road—anyone's lorry can break down. What d'you propose?"

"I'm not proposing," said Borodulin, "I'm announcing myself chief of the detachment. And I suggest that you, Comrade Snegirev, in consideration of your record, become detachment commissar. The detachment is mainly Komsomol, and you're a good man and no coward, you haven't tried to excuse yourself. Well, my lads, d'you approve?"

They hadn't been expecting such a take-over and started jabbering amongst themselves.

Roman Gittaulin put up his hand. His lorry was at the head of the convoy that day and he was afraid that at the next ice hummock he would be without a bonnet over his engine too.

"Lads, let me go to the rear, to the worn track, and if anyone gets sick, I'll also say that I'll be your chief..."

Stones thrown into Borodulin's garden. Alexei opened his sheepskin jacket, jerking his shoulder towards Snegirev:

"Answer, Commissar!"

"Gittaulin's right," agreed Snegirev, "the leading lorries'll have to keep changing. Whoever's in front is more at risk than the rest."

"Not so, Commissar!" interjected Borodulin. "As I understand it, no driver will miss the honour of being first, and I'll never put Gittaulin at the rear end, because there must be two crack drivers in front. If one slips up, the other leads the column, so that there won't be any hang-ups or stoppages."

"And you're a crack driver?" they shouted at him. "From the tail-end, yes?"

"Of course," laughed Alexei, and he threw his cigarette away. "I declare on my own responsibility that if in twenty minutes I haven't moved up from the tail of the column to the head, it means you're to be chief, Gittaulin, and I'll trundle along in the rear."

So saying, he went off without looking round, aware that all eyes were drilling into his back.

Waddling, his coat flying open, Alexei Borodulin walked past the drivers from the head of the column to his own lorry which was ticking over at the end. He felt that they were all watching him—some fearfully and mistrustfully, others sceptically and derisively. Perhaps they wanted to shout at his broad, slightly bent back and stop him. It was a snowy quagmire all round; they had only just managed to get through this low-lying terrain which had not seemed deep at first, and they would be sorry if, because of a silly row, yet another engine should choke and conk out in the snowy mush. But some kind of force rooted them to the spot; no one shouted, no one stopped Borodulin. They only started when the steel door of the cab slammed reverberatingly in the cold, and each felt an answering twinge in the chest when the engine roared tensely and Borodulin's lorry, reluctantly, as if being woken up, lurched backwards.

It kept crawling on in reverse and, strange to say, Borodulin was not standing on the footboard—he was retreating as if he could feel the passage being driven through the snow by the back wheels. No one could make sense of this manoeuvre; they could not understand how he could succeed, and all were bending down to see what was happening under his wheels. They expected him to get finally stuck; the engine would die away to a mosquito's buzz, the nerve-racking tension would break and he would jump out of the cab, swearing and shaking his fist at the bonnet.

Someone gave a long, drawn-out "Whe-e-ew!" of amazement. "He's given us the slip... Look where he is already!"

Borodulin's lorry was still crawling in reverse out of the swamp. It could already be seen on a hummock, as on the palm of the hand; there was even a band of light coming through under the wheels. Now it moved back a bit more, as if crawling down from the palm and all were ready to believe that he would surely turn round and head for Barakhsan. But the ZIL cut out, and the drivers breathed a sigh of relief. He'd stalled! However this was only for a moment: Borodulin changed gear, wrenched the wheel round to the right and accelerated. They could hear it. Then, as in a slow-motion film shot, as in a dream, for a long time heavily chained wheels churned up the snowy mush of the deep furrow recently ploughed by the column and, like a soldier out of a trench, he slowly rose under their gaze on to the snowy rampart and, skidding over the snowy dust for the last time, drove his front bumper through the virgin snow like a knife through butter, and went on and on, his engine howling, not changing gear, cutting the frozen surface with his front bumper as with the blade of a snow-plough. And, strange to say, he was swinging more and more steeply

round to the right, where the frozen snow seemed particularly deep and impassable; but the higher the lorry climbed, the easier its movement became—all this could be told from the sound of the engine as it growled contentedly like a dog which had been thrown a bone. The engine stopped squeaking and droning, and what the other drivers saw next was like a miracle. For the machine was travelling over the open tundra more easily than along the tracks! Ivanetsky poked his head out of his van, deceived by the smooth roar of the engine. No, it wasn't a helicopter and, realising this, he promptly ducked back in again. The lads waited for Borodulin to change into second or third. What had he found there? Asphalt or something under the snow? But without giving in to this temporary feeling of lightness which he too could hear in the sound of the engine, Alexei covered some two hundred metres on one side and sailed past them as they stood there gaping. Without changing gear over the rises, over the lightly powdered tundra, he overtook the column as if marking out a new direction for it to take, and only then did he stop for a moment, thinking; then, trying his driver's luck and fortune to the limit, he executed a sharp steep half-turn and crawled down into the marsh, nose to nose with Gittaulin's lorry.

Angry and red as a lobster, Borodulin rolled out of his cab. The circle before him parted and gave way. And then he mentioned what everyone had already forgotten:

"Twenty-three minutes ... slightly overdue."

"You're an ace, Borodulin!" Gittaulin was the first to admit it. "You should have turned the whole column back to front. We would have ploughed half the tundra with you!"

The men were raddled to the extreme by several days of hard driving which had turned into long forced halts, digging in the snow with spades,

exhausted by the nagging Ivanetsky who had bored them to distraction with his slavish line-by-line adherence to the instructions so that even the mere sight of his sarcastically bilious face had made them lose heart, demoralised with a sense of guilt and shame because things weren't going right with them. They have forgotten because of their jitteriness that it was possible to smile, sing and roar with laughter. They now breathed a sigh of relief, and for the first time in the last few days the savage wind over the tundra was sweet and intoxicated them like young wine—and all this had come to them with Borodulin, who was standing with them now, wiping the sweat from his happy face, his gummed hair slightly frozen, as was theirs when, steaming over a snowdrift, they drove their spades into it. Then, when the laughter was over, he asked for a cigarette and they had a smoke with him. Oh, they would have torn out the tongue of anyone who doubted that they would make it with this man. And, as an impatient foal urges on its rider, kicking back its heels, so, after the merriment, the relief and the amazement, they crowded round Borodulin, some slapping him on the shoulder, others on the back, others punching him in the side or in the stomach. They unintentionally all but knocked him down in the snow, and crushing, tugging at one another. Finally they stopped and said to him, "All right, that's enough, sufficient! Come on, Alyosha, stand up, take over. Allah won't forget us, he'll see us across the tundra."

He finally got up and brushed himself down. His smooth, clean face seemed to be saying, "All right, you devils, I agree, I'll take command." But he knitted his brows sternly and again they took this to mean, "I'm going to be tough! There'll be no let-up from me!" We'd better agree to everything." They would have gone through fire and water, but there was snow here, and they went through the snow.

"My lads!" Fruitily, and as was right for the moment, he gave voice, and the lads drew themselves up. "Listen to Order Number One. The radio operator will call up the helicopter for Ivanetsky. The text (his eyes sought out Snegirev) will be made out by you, Commissar... Order Number Two: the rear of the column is to be brought up by turns in reverse order: the last becomes the next to the last and so on. Change every four hours. Gittaulin is to keep close behind me. I warn you in advance: if my lorry goes out of action, I'll get into the one behind ... Gittaulin's! We won't be having a banquet, just supper with spirit. Round the campfire!.. A hundred grams per head. Two hundred for Ivanetsky. Bivouac after ten kilometres..."

"Why the discount for Gittaulin, Commander?"

"Because he's a Tatar!"

"Well?"

"Well! He's been leading the column, he'll be my backup."

...When Snegirev had finished talking, Basov, without doubting that this was what had happened, asked Borodulin:

"You're tough, you rascals! Is that how it was?"

"What else," admitted the other. "The Commissar doesn't know how to drivel. If he'd tarted up it, smoothed off the corners—but no. So I'll say it out straight: I don't like going against him! Of course, I'm self-appointed, but the mess-up was too much for me. On the one hand, Ivanetsky was right all the time; if we'd been driving along a proper road. But Vitek..." affectionately but mockingly, as if on purpose, he made Snegirev blush, "when you're between the hammer and the anvil, how d'you wriggle out of it? If you go at it head-on, they say you're climbing up on other folks' backs, and you're young, it's not nice... If

you keep on one side, they ask afterwards, 'Where were you looking, you bloody fool!' Whatever you do is wrong. So what's it mean? It means do wrong, but at least so that it works out right, that's the gist of it! I sized it up like this: our objective is the winter route. Who's going to make it? Not Ivanetsky with his belly, or Vitek with his brains, but lorries. And I can do it, mine's on the go. So why should I wait, why should the lads go through it when we've got it right there under our noses? Nikita Leontievich, I don't think there's any sense in taking me off it now. Snegirev's on the ball, the men are bursting to get to the ice, there's no grousing. As for me being self-appointed—The pike's in the river to keep the carp from going to sleep!"

"I think so too!" laughed Basov. "Are you confident?"

"About the winter road? You'll get it sooner than you expect!"

"That's the stuff! Well, d'you approve, Pyotr Evseyevich!"

"Ye-e-s..." Alimushkin had brightened up and recovered his sense of humour. "Not so much for the winter road, as because Borodulin's not harassing Snegirev, but putting up with him." And he winked at Borodulin, as if to say, "Don't get the wind up!"

They went out of the van, and the drivers were waiting impatiently roundabout. It was no secret to anyone what was being decided. They had gathered to stand up for their own man. Someone had been babbling that a new head of the column was in the helicopter waiting for the issue to be settled. Before Basov could ask them with an open grin, "Well, what d'you have to say, my lads? Satisfied?" they put the question to him straight.

"Do you acknowledge us?"

"Have I got any option?" Basov threw his hands

apart. But after the jokes: "The detachment has been acting sensibly and correctly on the whole. It prevailed over a temporary depression..."

"Under the influence of compression," prompted someone nearby.

"Yes," Basov nodded understandingly at this reply, but curtly, abruptly, as if showing that he did not want to return to the painful subject any more. "I see you've kept your will to win. That's important. The fate of the construction project depends on the winter route, and so the whole of Barakhsan is following your progress just now. There are plenty wanting to help you, but is it too early, perhaps?" He glanced at Snegirev. "What d'you think—will you cope?"

"With that commander?" The other had been infected by the general mood. "If anyone has any doubts, Nikita Leontievich might give him a lift to Barakhsan..."

"One passenger's enough!"

"Drive him on foot along all those kilometres!"

But they had already started shouting "Hurrah!" for Basov and Borodulin; they were intending, the shaggy, swarthy devils, to toss them in the air and tip them out on to the snow together with the pilots who had come to make Basov hurry up. While saying goodbye to the detachment, taking their letters and wishing them success once more, Basov himself felt how dear to him, compared to this nameless dot on the route, was the settlement with its customary din on the evening streets, the lights in the windows, the clang of bulldozers and the rapid stuttering of the rock drills that was so persistent it made your ears ring, the roar of the Rapids, to which you soon became accustomed so quickly that you didn't notice it any more... But here there was nothing of that, and he felt a pull, a yearning as for his own home. Then the mood passed, and he thought, "I wouldn't mind knocking back a glass with them! Or staying for good!"

While they were transferring the sick man from the van to the helicopter, and while the pilots were warming up the engine, Basov sat with Gittaulin in his lorry behind the wheel and himself tried to plough a few metres of road. Clumsily—he wasn't used to it, after all—he jerked the throttle and accelerated, and the swarthy Gittaulin, with a face in which the quick, wolverine's eyes glittered like agates, laughed at Basov, and the drivers laughed too, gathering round the lorry. When Basov climbed out of the cab, they praised him ironically, but he didn't take offence at their raillery. "Ah well," he repeated after them, "it's nothing! It'll come, just needs practice, that's all." And he admitted:

"I'd stay with you, but your centre-forwards are really tough; I'd never catch up..."

...Once more the helicopter gained height, the flight became bumpy again, and Basov, his forehead pressed to the cold glass of the port-hole solely in order not to look at Ivanetsky, was thinking how sickening it was when you had to work everything out for yourself, make decisions, and you're alone, like God in three persons—legislator, guardian of the laws, and yourself sometimes a lawbreaker, and yet people often look at you as the ultimate truth. They bring their complaints to you, but you have to carry on. You work like an ox, and no one asks if you've got an iron body, a stone soul, and what your heart is made of—plastic, perhaps? People around you are alive, you demand that they should carry out your orders, and they do so. But don't get it wrong, it's not you building the dam (the dam is not a blueprint) but them, with their nerves, hands, will and labour! Do you deserve more attention than they do? Hardly. You've been given everything except the right to be weak. Whatever you may do, you can't funk it and go sick like Ivanetsky. It can seem that your life belongs to them. It's not

so; each of them is free to dispose of himself, and so are you; but your conscience... Ask it, and it will answer that everything in you that is red-blooded and pure, is it not from your homeland, which nourishes its sons with strength and courage, and is mother to them, and judge? Is it not from the people themselves? Of course, you have shouldered no easy burden, but is it not also true that your happiness lies in the hard task that you are faced with?

Pale, wrapped up in two sheepskin coats, Ivanetsky slips sideways off the seat and stretches out his legs to reach Basov's boots with the toes of his warn reindeer-hide boots. Basov noticed the apologetic, wheedling look wandering over Ivanetsky's face. He is beseeching forgiveness. It seems to Basov that he is at present indifferent to Ivanetsky and therefore just. The task was within the bounds of normal human capacity... He can find no justification for Ivanetsky and is pleased with his own firmness.

Ivanetsky's eyes are glazed like jellies, and there's no telling whether from cold or fear. The wide nostrils are like those of a hard-driven hound. He has realised that it will soon be Barakhsan and another conversation will begin with him, and he has started fidgeting and worrying. The ginger sideboards have somehow reddened, have started shining, have curled up, though they were looking like crushed felt before.

Basov stood up and went over to the woman doctor. Upset by the needless emergency call, she was sitting and shivering alone at the porthole, and he threw his own sheepskin coat over her short unpadded jacket.

He went up the steps and squeezed through the narrow hatchway into the pilot's cabin, but he could even feel Ivanetsky's eyes rivetted on his heels. And he thought, not with bitterness but with hurt feelings, "It's my own fault, and mine only. I

shouldn't have sent Ivanetsky!" Until that moment, he had been consoling himself that he had relied on Ivanetsky as a man, but in actual fact he had given in not to a man but to vociferous envy. He had been a coward.

"Stop scowling, Nikita Leontievich!" shouted the commander of the crew. "It's dark enough with this cloud as it is. Or we'll give you a shake-up and get rid of all the rubbish, right, Senya?"

"You bet," responded his co-pilot and pulled back the control column slightly, as a result of which the helicopter bounced like a ball, describing a sinusoid in the air.

Basov smiled helplessly.

"Won't you be spending the night in Barakhsan?" he asked.

"No. We'll deliver you, and then we'll fly straight to the port of call. We have a law of the sea too!" and he winked at Basov.

Basov went down into the passenger cabin; going up to Alimushkin who had suddenly turned sad, he put his hand on his shoulder.

"You'll fly with this," he shouted, "until the weather permits..."

Alimushkin nodded.

"Don't take it hard, friend." Basov bent down to Alimushkin's ear again. "Borodulin will cut that road or bust."

"Yes, he'll iron it out," Alimushkin laughed in the same tone. "I'm sorry for Vitya Snegirev. In case your crack driver squelches him... What d'you think?"

"No-o-o. It's to Vitya's benefit. I could learn a thing or two from Borodulin myself," he admitted. "He's got iron guts."

"So what's the matter?" grinned Alimushkin. "Roll up your sleeves and hit out left and right..."

"The trouble is that I've got you beside me, but he's got Snegirev."

"Is that the whole difference?"

Basov shrugged his shoulders. In Alimushkin's sceptical "hit out" he sensed not only mockery, but a warning about Ivanetsky, and this annoyed him. He did not ask any more questions. But Alimushkin, waiting for the helicopter to steady itself after a violent gust of wind, shouted:

"Both of them (he meant Snegirev and Borodulin) are immature characters; they don't know what they'll come up with next. But we're already half-fed up with ours. Isn't that so?"

In the evening, at a conference about the winter road which took place in Alimushkin's absence, Basov told about the trip to the road and about the situation that had arisen there. Basov did not want to talk about Ivanetsky, perhaps because he well remembered how he himself had dismissed the objections to Ivanetsky's nomination, and now he didn't know how to deal with the man in future. Still Basov admitted as a fact:

"Although medicine has pronounced its diagnosis—something to do with a disorder of the nervous system—Ivanetsky has let us down. The route was too much for him..."

And he was silent. Silin rescued him with a question.

"And what's your opinion of Borodulin, now, Nikita Leontievich?" he said slowly.

"The same as yours, Gavrila Panteleimonovich! That Borodulin is self-appointed is no great problem now, we can reconcile ourselves to that. What matters is the man himself, of course. Judging by his carryings-on, he's a freak or an anarchist—I haven't worked it out; but he'll get the column through, I've no doubt of that."

"He will," echoed Silin, "but how many lorries have they got now? Eleven or twelve?"

"Twelve."

"A dozen... And five or six'll be left, with luck... What do we get out of it?"

"There are more lorries moth-balled in the estuary. We'll get them ready. But we need that winter road from Borodulin!"

"Won't you count us in too?" asked Korostylev, taking offence in advance at Basov for a possible refusal.

"I'll count you in," laughed the chief engineer. "As from tomorrow you'll start building a bridge over Sigovyi Stream so that there'll be a bridge over it ready for the return of the column. We've no option, there's no avoiding that stream."

After the conference, Silin hung back with Basov and looked at him enquiringly.

"What did you leave unsaid?"

"Gavrila Panteleimonovich, I wanted to stay out there," confessed Basov unexpectedly, and he flushed, "on the winter route."

"You should have," laughed Silin. "You think we couldn't cope here without you? Although... Your authority would suffer more."

"Why?" said Basov in surprise.

"Borodulin's no worse a man than you will be. Perhaps a bit better, even."

"In what way?" Basov looked into Silin's eyes with interest.

"In what way! Plenty... He is thick-skinned; but one boob on your part and you'd be sunk. You think it doesn't show?"

Knitting his V-shaped brows, Silin was smoking intently, as if the conversation was already over; he would simply finish his cigarette and go. But, carefully shaking off the ash, he waited. Would the other say something else or not? Basov had forgotten about cigarettes. He sat for a few moments, pensive, detached, then abruptly rose to his feet and, squeezing his hands under his armpits, began walking and dancing about the office.

"Keep still! What are you hopping about for?" snapped Silin reproachfully.

Basov caught the reproach in his voice, but the reproach more like a consolation. Silin's eyes were calm, all-understanding. Basov didn't have to explain anything, but nevertheless he said:

"I'll give one more order, and that'll be that. But who's to blame? Me? Of course, me!.. But why do I keep thinking about him all the time?"

"It's that sort of job," sighed Silin, without insisting. "You're not on your own, we all think for one another..."

In general a man begins to look back more carefully when he's coming up to the finishing post, thought Silin. When you're out in front yourself, it's the same as in a race: you haven't time to screw your head round. And, almost involuntarily comparing his own life with Basov's Silin did not feel disillusioned—he accepted as rightful that never-to-be-surmounted difference between them, determined not by age or obligations, but by something else that comes to each man from life itself, from the times. Thinking about that human difference, Silin keenly felt its inevitability, the inevitability with which, for instance, the cars of the 70s—ZIL, MAZ and KrAZ, had replaced the AMOs of the 20s. They had a new and incomparable quality.

"An automobile, no doubt," he said, "is more easily remade than a man, but it's difficult too. Let time show. Don't lose hope. He'll come through, that Ivanetsky of yours, he won't get stuck."

"How about it?" asked Basov hopefully. "Will Korostylev take him on?"

"I doubt it! You have to answer for him," frowned Silin. "And he's like a car without a steering column, he's out of control."

"Him, yes..." replied Basov more in reply to himself that Silin. "It's not easy to come to terms

with fame. Very well, I'll fix him up somewhere so that I can keep an eye on him."

Silin took offence.

"You're in too much of a hurry. You've burned your fingers on him, so you should wait for Alimushkin. One man can't take such things on."

"But I'm not on my own," said Basov, wearily making light of it. "I'm appointing him safety equipment engineer. He'll be subordinate to me, that means the demand is from me, and then we'll see further... It's unpleasant," he suddenly shrugged his shoulders and was silent for a while. "But I'll tell Alimushkin that you suggested the idea. If anything goes wrong, he can tear a strip off the two of us... Be prepared for any eventuality, Gavrila Panteleimonovich."

Basov himself likewise understood that a man can be forgiven much in the North, but not cowardice. Ivanetsky did not look like a coward or a weakling, however, and he had disarmed everybody by being so eager for the route. He had elbowed the others out of the way, had read them lectures: a career, he had said, must not be made with the tongue, one must work with one's head and one's hands... He was no fool, either. "Would he really fail to understand," wondered Basov, "that once he had been retained, it meant he must do everything humanly possible to justify the trust put in him?"

Alimushkin thought otherwise. That Basov had left Ivanetsky virtually as his deputy was a glaring blunder on the chief engineer's part, if not downright mulishness. Trying to suppress his annoyance, Alimushkin was going to invite Basov at once to the Party Committee meeting but Nikita interpreted this hesitation in his own way as indecision and asked:

"Is this about Ivanetsky? Why haven't I sent him to the Riviera?"

"Yes."

"I think he might adapt. I've put him on safety equipment. He's going about and shouting with the men!"

"I know where you've put him. Only he's not going about on his own, but by your orders, or on your suggestion. The men are laughing because you're giving him a leg-up."

"There's such a sin as training people little by little... But you, Alimushkin ("Alimushkin"—to him this was the last straw), are you waiting for me to confess my sins? Forgive me, I'm not immune... To mistakes, I repeat, I'm not immune. Not I, nor Ivanetsky, nor doubtless yourself. And where was I to put him in any case? Who wants to bother with such a failure. I sent him to the winter road—now I'm paying for it."

"You're too kind-hearted."

"Not at someone else's expense!"

"I'm not sure... Didn't it occur to you that the appointment of Ivanetsky was a slap in the face to our comrades, who all warned you: 'Don't rush, don't waste your time on him, you don't really know him.' It means they already had doubts about him! But you—oh no!—you see further than everybody. Isn't that why you've dug your heels in?"

"All right," agreed Basov after a silence, "I'll make him an ordinary engineer. Let him work his way up."

V

The winter road was being driven with difficulty. The deceptive straight line drawn on the map from Barakhsan to the Aniva estuary had long since become crooked. Borodulin's column was driving a route over the high ground, carefully crawling

from hill to hill and leaving a winding trail behind it. The lorries seldom stopped. Borodulin slid on his backside from the cabin into the snow, flopped into it and guffawed, wiping his already scarlet face and shaking himself like a goose after a swim. Then, after giving each tyre a kick with his boot—his sheepskin eternally wide open, his hat over one ear—he walked along the column, dragging the men out into the cold as if they were puppies—one by the leg, one by the sleeve, and sometimes, if it was handy, by the ear, saying:

"Stop dozing at the wheel, blockhead. I'll show you a merry life and the Moscow-Simferopol highway..."

The detachment commissar had cheered up after Ivanetsky's departure. He made his way from the trailer to Borodulin's cab and the latter, understanding what it was like for man without a lorry, let him take the driving wheel sometimes if the road seemed tolerable; but he never closed his eyes and sat next to Snegirev, prompting him incessantly.

"Don't meddle, Alyosha," requested Snegirev with a timid, apologetic smile, adding conciliatingly, "You have a nap meanwhile, and if anything happens I'll wake you up..."

"Drive straighter and throttle down!" grumbled Borodulin.

Both felt uneasy. What each was suppressing in himself was coming to the surface in this tiff.

In principle, thought Snegirev swallowing his chagrin, Borodulin is right... In cold like this, iron snaps if you so much as spit on it, it loses toughness. The slightest bump and somewhere or other it'll snap like a bone. And supposing you're on ice that's as smooth as a tablecloth and is dusted with snow, you drive on to a bubble sealed by a thin film of ice, you squash it with your wheels, and there you are sitting in a hole—then what? Whether, you want it or not, you've got to

step on the gas and pull out of the hole in one spurt at the risk of making the engine seize up or the transmission snap, and when *that* damned thing goes, it snaps like a chewed elastic band. Borodulin's not to blame, in fact he's just as likely to hit an air bubble the same as yours, only deeper, and he's gone down more than once, but he's crawled out of it in one piece, intact—him and the lorry too—that's what mattered... He's right, it isn't a matter of traction, if you're empty-headed, if the traction in your noddle has gone wrong... Even so, he was offended at the way Borodulin kept showing off in front of him. It wasn't worth it, such an advantage might snap at any moment...

It was no consolation to Snegirev that he wasn't the only one left without a lorry, although there were no tyros on the route. Silin knew whom he was selecting for the detachment; but before they came to the tundra, the lads had been driving on asphalt or concrete. Some from the country, like Borodulin, or from the army were more cheerful about driving cross-country, but city folk like Snegirev himself weren't quite up to the mark.

It was hard to sit like an owl beside a friend with whom you couldn't have a frank talk. But when you're twenty, when you are only just on the way up, it sometimes seems that you know the world with its big and small problems better than others, and if you don't know something, then perhaps it simply doesn't exist! The boys reacted readily to his jokes, would join in a song, dreamed as the first advance team once dreamed in the canvas tent at the Rapids, and it seemed to Viktor that the recent failures had brought the boys closer together; they had become attached to one another and as all had confidence in him, so did he, after Ivanetsky's departure have confidence in each of them: not one would funk it, not one would leave a comrade in trouble. He dreamed

that, beginning with this route, he did not belong to himself. Perhaps years would pass, and he was destined to become detachment commissar over hundreds or thousands of men, not just twenty! And he did not doubt for a moment that for their sake he would sacrifice everything, even his life. Except that it was a pity no one had guessed the grandeur of his plans and that even Pyotr Evseyevich Alimushkin did not see what a fine show he was putting up.

The silence got on Borodulin's nerves.

"It's handier for a commissar not to have a lorry, eh, Vitya?" he grinned.

Snegirev's jaw tightened and he did not even smile.

Borodulin spat furiously: he'd just had a basinful. He could trail along at the tail-end of the column, he wouldn't follow each driver like a cat in case he fell behind... But here he had to keep looking to the front and the rear as if his head was on runners. No let-up. Ready to pull his ZIL virtually by hand over any ridge, any hole or any ice-bubble. All the more must Snegirev understand how important it was for the head of the detachment not to lose his lorry. He himself had been saying that lorries now are like personal weapons... And in his anger, he nearly reminded Snegirev of his own words, but spared him. Let sleeping dogs lie.

"You'll take over from Roman after bivouac," said Alexei. "I'll take Gittaulin with me."

Borodulin was nursing his success. He was sure that nothing could go wrong while he was at the wheel, and for that reason, although he was nodding and being lulled to drowsiness by the reeking warmth, he kept rubbing his eyes with his fists. If necessary—he would prop them open with matches; but he had no intention of giving up his steering-wheel.

When they had fortified themselves with hot

coffee, Alexei affectionately patted Gittaulin on the back of the head—he had noticed that the Tatar responded to affection—and, laying his hand on his shoulder, asked:

"Want to ride with me, Roman? Looks as though you're angry with Borodulin—I'm always getting in your way!"

"You'll give me a ride..." drawled the other mistrustfully, and he laughed, flattered. He remembered that Borodulin always singled him out before the others, and not for nothing. "Shall I leave my lorry, then?" he asked naively.

"Leave it, Roman, of course," said Borodulin pleasantly.

"Well, I never!" Gittaulin shook his head.

"Let Snegirev take yours over," said Alexei, suddenly serious. "Or the commissar'll turn nasty without work."

"You could let him have your lorry."

"Roman, I'm doing you a big favour and you're putting on airs... Why? What's it all in aid of?"

"You think I'm an addle-brained Tatar," snarled Gittaulin, offended.

"Let's go, let's go, don't be silly. We'll have a chat. I'll give you a fast ride," he promised, laughing.

But Roman reacted indifferently to these words. All the journey it was as much as anyone could do to shelter from the confounded wind, which, at an appropriate suggestion from Gittaulin himself, the drivers had christened the Nordvik. At a halt, the Nordvik usually blew from north to south, as from out of a pipe, but in the open tundra the north for some reason was always on your right-hand side. Whichever way you turned your lorries, however much you altered course, the Nordvik invariably blew on the right-hand door—even Roman's side could feel it. If you were slack, though you'd plugged the cracks with felt, if you didn't line the whole cab, there'd be no warmth and a sheepskin

jacket wouldn't help. When there was no wind, each tiny little hole, even as small as one made by a needle in a jet, was fringed with brittle tendrils of rime—the frost drove the warmth out of the cab. It was hot in Borodulin's cab, and Roman, taking off his hat, complimented him with a flair of an expert:

"It's good here, no Nordvik..."

"I've got Byelomor instead," said Borodulin with a wink, and offered him a packet of cigarettes that was lying on the seat.

They lit up, enjoying the acknowledgement and fellow-feeling for one another which, once it has arisen and in time been recognised, easily develops into friendship between men. Roman, running a comb over his black, raven-sheen hair, that responded with an electric crackle, smiled at Borodulin with the corners of his thin lips and, leaning forward, silently studied the tundra, which was like a pale band flowing under the wheels. He was trying to understand with what sixth sense or vision, by what signs Alexei guessed the way, driving the lorry with carefree abandon over places where there was little snow. However much he strained his eyes, he noticed nothing remarkable. Even so there was something important that Borodulin alone knew and understood about that road, otherwise they would have been crawling along like tortoises. Frustrated, with wrath-blinded eyes—how was it possible to look and not see, to see and not understand?—Roman scowled, cursing his bad eyesight, and sat like that for some time as if trying to solve the riddle. Somewhat calmer again, he felt that the road was lulling him to sleep, and at this point his sensitive Tatar ear detected a nagging whine in the engine. Roman glanced at Borodulin, and the other gave him a quick, cunningly amused look and pulled the wheel over slightly. Roman half-closed his eyes again. Aha, the engine was beginning to whine

once more—exactly! Borodulin was turning. It was all so easy; the deeper the snow, the greater the load on the wheel, which meant going to one side!.. Understanding the riddle, Roman could not restrain himself.

"What do you guess the road by, eh?"

"The colour," said Borodulin condescendingly.

The colour? What colour? Snow was the same colour everywhere, as an old flannel hospital dressing-gown, grey with repeated washing. Only the snow was still shining on the ridges with a violet-blue shimmer; it was the glitter of frozen mica, on which the now grey, now smoky thickness of the sky presses and is reflected. Why was Borodulin trying to fool him—there was no colour on the snow!

"No," Borodulin smiled at his taking offence. "Look harder... Look, on the left—there's a ravine over there, and there's more snow: the shadows are dark, almost black, but there's a white ridge on the right. If you want, we'll turn off, but you'll have to dig out the differential... Agreed?"

And he added for conviction:

"I don't keep secrets up my sleeve."

"Why dig out? Why the differential? Drive straight on, and that's your road..." muttered Romka, and suddenly he cottoned on. "Do you go by the squeeze?"

"Exactly, the squeeze! How did you guess?" asked Borodulin. "Have you sought out the colour?.. You need a sharp eye for this business, same as a hunter, to take aim and bang!—spot on target."

"Squeeze"—the term is current on the roads in the North, when one wheel-rut clings to the cliffs, the other hangs on the edge of the precipice. On such roads, if you come to a steep downward slope or don't brake in time and the lorry skids—then move fast, jump out, or you'll go

down with it in its last salto-mortale. That's why the driver has to hug the side. A detour is usually found, and so not all old drivers have heard of the "squeeze". Roman Gittaulin knew about it, and Borodulin liked this—he had not been wrong about the Tatar after all. True, they were now travelling along the middle rather than hugging the side. They were being squeezed not by the mountains or cliffs, but by deep gullies, along the ridges of which Borodulin was leading the column. If they went nose-down into a gully, it would not be particularly disastrous, but they would have to do some energetic climbing.

"So you guessed by the colour?" said Borodulin, repeating his question.

"By the noise! I thought you were listening to the engine."

"You're pretty smart!" laughed Alexei.

"So are you..."

Borodulin swerved slightly, and in the side-mirror Gittaulin could see the heavy, unwieldy carcasses of the other lorries, following in line one after another like a herd of elephants. The sidelights winked as by habit, and Roman was glad for his own lorry; the commissar was also proving himself a first-class driver and was well up to the mark. He was all right, that one...

"Why d'you keep swinging to the left? Why?" asked Romka, shrugging his shoulders in bewilderment. "We need the west, and the west is on our right..."

"The road's better this way, we'll make a detour," said Alexei reassuringly. "Have you come to Barakhsan for long?"

"For good. Is that for long or not?"

"It's all right, it's fair term," agreed Borodulin, swerving even more sharply. "Are you just a driver?"

"I was in technology as a pioneer," declared Roman solemnly, as if on stage. "We had an

aero-modelling circle in Kazan, so I joined. There was a circle for young tractor drivers, so I joined, and a singing circle, so I joined. Then I chucked the circle; went to the rubbish dump and collected all the parts for a motorbike. It was a smashing machine, you could have done aerobatics off a ski jump! Gittaulin would have been number one racing driver on it, honest!"

"Well?"

"The traffic inspector wouldn't give me a certificate for it."

"Did he confiscate the bike?"

"He did! In case it blew up."

"So it was the army next, was it?" asked Borodulin, as if about something that was a matter of course.

Gittaulin nodded.

The road wound in and out. Hillocks, rises, smooth descents. Straight on, to the left, another turn... Roman looked at the mirror and saw the column behind stopping. Snegirev switched his headlights on and off twice, asking Borodulin to stop. Borodulin saw the signal, but carried on without reducing speed.

"Stop! He's asking you to stop!" said Gittaulin, deciding that something had gone wrong with Snegirev's lorry. "We've got to pull up... Borodulin, stop, stop!" and he even reached for the gear lever.

"Don't!" interrupted Borodulin and he slapped Gittaulin's hand. "Don't barge in! See, here's a fine slope down coming. If we stop, we'll get so stuck that you'll spend the night digging with your belly. And that way we'll ram him on the move..."

The others were stopping behind Snegirev's lorry. The drivers could see that Borodulin was leaving them behind without slowing down, and this meant for each of them, and for the whole column, "Do as I do." So they were leaving Gittaulin's lorry behind. Another one. A pity. It

had covered half the route like magic; no breakdowns, no scratches. And they swore, wondering on which side it would be better to pass him, but they couldn't help going up to Snegirev so as to commiserate with him, and each thought, as if it might have been him, with what eyes the commissar would look at Gittaulin... But for some reason, there was no sign of Snegirev or Gittaulin, and this seemed strange, because drivers don't abandon their lorries just like that... No, they don't. Three of them, waddling through the snow in high fur boots, walked round the tarpaulin-covered body and drummed their fists on the door.

"Anyone in there?"

They heard movements and muttering inside: then the door opened and Snegirev climbed awkwardly out of the cab.

"What are you up to, Commissar?" they asked as they gathered round him.

"Nothing." He dismissed them with a gesture of annoyance. "I've plugged up the holes... That blasted Nordvik has penetrated the whole side... And another thing..." He went round the back.

"A fine time for that business! You should keep a bottle handy!" Guffawing the lads went round the back for the same purpose.

Gittaulin's lorry was in perfect condition. Why had Snegirev stopped at that moment and why had he signalled to Borodulin? All the time he was sitting at the wheel, Borodulin's track had been stubbornly veering to the left, and the last steep turn with a descent, also to the left, had made Viktor suddenly realise something. He had braked sharply. Knowing that his headlights were clearly visible to Borodulin on the turn, he had flashed them, demanding a halt, but to no avail. What a mess-up! Viktor distractedly let his head fall on to the wheel. In all, he had only a few seconds to check himself and settle for perhaps the last opportunity on this trip to prove to all that he and

not Borodulin should lead the detachment... He did not know, and did not want to know, whether Borodulin had made an unintentional mistake or had swerved to one side deliberately; but it was obvious that along the bank of some stream or other they had turned sharply southwards, changing direction. The stream was winding less and less, which meant that its mouth was already near: it was a sign. Just as a man straightens his road as he nears his goal... Snegirev estimated that if the stream flowed into the Aniva, they would be somewhere halfway to the warehouses. He did not stop to think whether this was good for them or bad, he simply felt that Borodulin was belittling him again in the eyes of the detachment with his stubbornness. If he consulted him, Snegirev would now reason differently. Borodulin must be given a lesson just once, he thought. He would start up, step on the gas, let in the clutch, swing the wheel to the right and take the column with him. Let Borodulin catch up afterwards!

But it wasn't so easy to pull the wheel over. Perhaps for a moment longer than he should have done, Snegirev was thinking about his desire to get rid of Borodulin. With Borodulin's tactics, chances of success were a hundred to one, only they seemed dishonest to Snegirev, as he was not taking the initiative into his own hands—by compulsion, of necessity—but was intending and waiting for the moment to unseat Borodulin, and his cheeks burned at the thought. But now fists were already banging on the cab and he climbed out, flexed his limbs and shouted to the "champions" in an excessively hearty voice:

"Hurry up, hurry up, lads! We've got to catch Borodulin up!"

They answered him with a roar of laughter. But they were already laughing at Gittaulin. He had jumped out of Borodulin's lorry while it was moving and, gasping for breath, was running back.

There was such sincere despair on his worry-creased face, such regret at his recent kindness (why had he not thought better of it, why had he entrusted the lorry to Snegirev) that it was impossible not to make fun of the poor Tatar.

"It's all up, Roman," shouted the men. "Take your Cadillac away!"

Gittaulin dashed his hat to the ground.

"I knew it, Commissar!"

"Had a good drink of antifreeze, or something?" enquired Snegirev calmly, "so that the Nordvik doesn't get you?"

"Is it in one piece?" Gittaulin guessed from the other's voice, embraced the bonnet and gently stroked the chugging metal. "Clever girl, my darling..."

"Get in, Roman, everything's all right!" sighed Snegirev, and he trudged off along the worn track.

"Where are you going?" shouted Gittaulin. "Borodulin's going to push ahead and stop until the tanks run dry. We'll catch him up together!"

Gittaulin put on speed on Borodulin's downward slope. The lorry was running sensitively, the engine sang, smoothly pushing up its revs, and it seemed to Gittaulin that the ZIL had recognised his owner. Good! He calmed down, and, in his joy, caterwauled something in his own Tatar language. Now, like Borodulin, he could distinguish the colour of the snow. To the left of the track the shadow was darker, on the right it was lighter: he should steer along the borderline between them. And because he knew this little secret of the road, his heart was nearly bursting with joy. He had to tell it someone, even if it was only Snegirev. Fearing to make an ass of himself—after all, Borodulin could already have told Snegirev everything—Gittaulin was warily curious.

"D'you know why Borodulin turned off that way?"

"I suppose so," answered Snegirev glumly.

"No-o-o," said Gittaulin triumphantly. "The commissar ought to know! You must understand the chief's trick. He can see the snow underneath him. Get it?

"Roman," asked Snegirev in a trembling voice, still thinking his own thoughts. "Supposing we turn right? Will you drive a route that way?"

"In the name of Snegirev?"

"In memory of him," joked the other.

Gittaulin's coal-black eyebrows twitched, nevertheless he took this as a compliment. In the name of or in memory of—this was no time for subtleties, if the commissar acknowledged your skill. Thrusting out his sharp chin towards Borodulin's tracks, he said grimly:

"We must drive along this road, on the squeeze, otherwise, Commissar, you and I'll end up in another era..."

Snegirev mistook his meaning. He thought that Borodulin has given Gittaulin a warning and then had put him out to stop the column being diverted. And he regretted that he had missed his chance: he had given it much thought and he should have acted at once, on a hunch, without hesitation. Gittaulin was naive, but he still stuck up for Borodulin. And he felt offended: Borodulin, for all his glory, would not earn anything, apart from another hundred, and Snegirev would gladly hand over his to Borodulin down to the last kopek. The trouble is that the moral capital cannot be converted into banknotes. Why did things drop into the hands of the man who didn't need them, whereas another sought but could not find?

"Gittaulin!" said Snegirev so sharply that the other was disconcerted by the peremptory tone of his voice, so that he repeated more gently: "Roman, we've gone off course; we might come out at the Aniva any moment. We must warn Alexei..."

Gittaulin was silent, thinking over his words.

"Please hurry! Or can't you manage it?"

"We'll catch up," snapped Gittaulin and he scratched behind his ear. "You're wrong, Commissar."

"What?"

"Off the point! Borodulin's not a bad egg. No need to make a meal of him. No-o," and he shook his head.

Nevertheless, Roman switched on the headlamps. The yellow, probing beams ran on to snow churned up by the deep tyres and chains of Borodulin's lorry. As if sniffing this trail, the beams hurriedly bounded over the printed ruts, and Gittaulin, half-standing and almost resting his chest on the wheel, in order not to let it be jerked out of his grasp when his wheels caught the side on turns, gunned the engine mercilessly and quickly drew nearer to the lorry in front. The tail-end of Borodulin's ZIL began to twinkle in front, like a dancing shadow. For some time, both lorries seemed to be travelling in the same harness. Snegirev signalled with his headlamps again. Borodulin put on speed. As if its engine had the power of two, skidding, howling, its heavy body shuddering, his lorry began to pull away. "He's a demon, that man," thought Snegirev, "he loves a race.." He fell back in his seat and closed his eyes, not listening to Gittaulin. What was to be done?

"Put on the brakes, Roman! Stop..." he suddenly decided. "He'll see and he'll stop dead too!"

And, after a hundred metres, Borodulin also braked. From the steep, high bank before them they could see the snow-covered Aniva. The opposite bank, soft and undulating, receded smoothly into the distance, and nearby, under a cliff, the level ice teased them with what looked like a trouble-free, pleasant drive ahead. Borodulin climbed out on to the wing. To the right and the left, the bank was scarred with deep, precipitous crevasses.

After the monotony of the tundra, the hills, slashed by sharp projections, seemed unexpected—as if someone had worked hard there, hewing the rocks with a gigantic axe. When the whole column drew up and took up position in line astern behind their commander's lorry, Borodulin looked back and realised that the ZILs had driven into a trap. In front was a precipice; on either side there were deep and excessively steep gullies, so that their lorries would overturn if they ever thought of driving down on to the ice. The way back was along a knife's edge—there was no road there either and they could not turn round. All who came up to the bank saw this too and were stunned. How could they have committed such a blunder?

Shouting something indistinguishable from above, Borodulin jumped into the snow, guffawed, poked one of the man who came up in the ribs, tripped him up, shouted an order so that the men should get into a scrum in the usual way and get their circulation going again, crawled out, got away to one side and went straight to where the despondent and gloomy Snegirev was sitting in Gittaulin's lorry. Borodulin banged on the glass.

"Hey, Commissar, wake up and get a move on!"

The other reluctantly opened the door, turned half-round to speak to Alexei and asked:

"What is it, Borodulin—the Aniva?"

"It is!"

"You got there fast enough..."

Borodulin detected a note of menace in his voice. He didn't like it.

"Don't climb up the wall, laddie!" he said curtly. "I don't respect hasty conclusions."

"You make your mind up too quickly... For everybody. You're in a hurry..." Snegirev started climbing out of the lorry.

"And what did you think?" Borodulin was in a temper, but he moderated his voice. "This is your

department, Commissar—one for all. I was not racing for my own benefit—you could've guessed as much. Now you've got to. Shove in the other part of the slogan, all for one! The worst thing of all is a muddle. They'll come to their senses and the nagging'll start. I'll put the halter on them, but it doesn't suit me now."

"But you're braver than all of them..."

"Stop flattering, Commissar!" Borodulin squared his shoulders and barred the way. Clenching his teeth, he pointedly banged his fist into the palm of his hand and added in a low voice, because someone was approaching them, "I've seen some crazy people, and this is a wild place, each man's his own boss. Remember... We can share the kudos afterwards. I won't take yours"—shaking his finger under his nose—"I'm up to the ears in my own... Let it all be like this!" And he balled his fist.

Snegirev scowled and was silent.

Listening to the voices of the approaching men and peering into their faces, he did not notice any particular alarm for the time being. True, the men were tired, but they were laughing at Gittaulin, who was telling about the chase after Borodulin. But they were listening to Gittaulin and laughing vaguely. They kept glancing at the Aniva for some reason.

Snegirev walked up to the bank. His feet rooted themselves to the cliff. He twisted his neck, as if cringing in the wind, but nowhere could he see even the slightest suitable slope down to the ice. His hair stood on end under his hat. A precipice! They'd been lucky, as it is said, the way one is only lucky in unofficial trips. Did that mean going back now? And how were they going to do it?

"It's a beauty, Commissar." It was Borodulin behind him.

"An escalator..."

"Exactly! Just what the doctor ordered, espe-

cially for sensation seekers."

The others had clustered into a group near them, and several men began talking at once. But for the time being it was reproaches: for the straight line on the map, for the distance having been cut down, for driving over the rises—"Borodulin's way"—and for the cliffs, and because he had left the column—in general, for everything at once, including his belly. He was standing there and shaking it as if nothing had happened. The most suitable time for settling accounts—just count the ribs!

Anyone whose nerves were not so strong would already having been looking round. But Borodulin stood there and laughed, the skirts of his sheepskin coat flapping. Then he got fed up, damped his smile a bit and snarled:

"Did you think a Polar bear was going to show you the way, eh?"

"You did instead!"

"I did!"

And they started jabbering again; the foul language was already flying freely. Borodulin took his hands out of his pockets, but Snegirev intervened.

"Stop drivelling! And in this cold!" he shouted. "Are we all together? Then into the van!"

Pulling a flares pistol out of his sheepskin coat, he blew down the barrel (it was nevertheless a weapon, so let them all see it), inserted a cartridge with a green nose and fired. The green flare was the signal for a general assembly.

They walked along behind the detachment, the commander and the commissar. All these days of the trip, and especially those when Borodulin led the column, had given them ample opportunities to get together and to know and understand one another better. Borodulin was in command, but rather, perhaps, he drew the column after him like a draft horse, knowing that where he had gone,

the others would go too, would not fall behind and would not complain of fatigue. They would have gone as far as the estuary in this way had it not been for that confounded loop. Borodulin has tightened it hard, and he, Comrade Snegirev, was to blame.

"Will you wriggle out of it?" Snegirev asked Borodulin abruptly.

"Easy as pie," grinned the other.

The zig-zag track of the road by which they had made their way here was too narrow for the column to be turned round to face the opposite way. Nearer to the Aniva, the high ground became sharper and narrower, steep gullies hemmed it in, and now, looking into their snowy depths, one could only marvel at Borodulin's luck and the confidence with which he had ploughed his way along the very ridge. Damn him, it wouldn't even have mattered losing twenty-four hours so long as they could turn back! But how? And Borodulin was still making fun of them, and at him, and at all of them: everything was okay, yes, okay! Rudeness, obscenity, even a fist in the mouth—Snegirev could expect anything from Borodulin, nothing would surprise him; yes, and drivers are a wary folk, they won't go astray; but Snegirev had not expected such amazing indifference toward him, almost contempt, and he simply could not understand it. "There's a viper for you," and he nearly swore out loud. "Why didn't I spot him at once?"

They were assembling in the third lorry from the front where in a cabin mounted on a long platform and lined with double felt and plywood, a pot-bellied stove smoked almost round the clock. A table had been nailed down in the middle of the body. On the side, under a twelve-volt lamp, hung the commissar's pride and joy, a road wall-newspaper with a caricature of the best driver on the route—the features were very like Gittaulin's.

Inside there was a homely smell of cabbage soup and porridge, and the Spidola portable transistor radio was never switched off; or if it was, it was to be replaced by the fine-strung balalaika of the red-headed cook, Tolya Chervonenko. All this was necessary and right here, where the tired drivers whiled away their short rest-periods.

And now, suddenly, face to face with one another were eighteen men, strapping, healthy, exhausted by driving and hope, angry and offended at Borodulin for the first time.

"Have you used up all the boiling water?" Borodulin asked the silent Chervonenko with annoyance. "Fetch some at once!"

Chervonenko, with his eternal flair for jokes, and witticisms, which is why he had ended up in the detachment although he was not qualified as a driver, clicked his tongue to imitate heels, turned right, dived to the left, clattered something, rattled something else, all in the wink of an eye, and suddenly mugs, a white kettle the size of half a bucket, and a big enamelled dish containing a mountain of lump sugar appeared on the table as if by magic. Chervonenko flicked some imaginary dust off by the patterned towel, draped it over his crooked arm like a napkin, and stood erect in polite anticipation, an exemplary waiter.

"Tea's ready. Kindly partake!" he announced in a humble voice, but broke into a broad, white-toothed smile. He hastened up to Borodulin, helping him to pull off the heavy sheepskin coat by the sleeve and saying as he did so: "Take off the young master's coat..."

"Some young master!" said an irascible voice by the stove.

Borodulin shoved his cigarette into a jam tin and drew a mug of hot water towards him, dropped several pieces of sugar into it and stirred it with a spoon.

The tired, seemingly drowsy face, the swollen,

unblinking eyelids, the heavy, bowed, sloping shoulders and the whole attitude of a man extremely tired and frozen stiff, listlessly touching the hot mug with his fingers—all suggested indifference and deadly boredom. He wasn't really present, it seemed, but Snegirev knew that Borodulin wasn't the kind of man suddenly to demagnetise himself. On the contrary, the cat was narrowing its eyes, pretending not to notice the mouse that had just pushed its nose outside its hole. He was watching for the right moment. Borodulin was giving people time to relax, to say their piece, to vent their fury, and he no doubt had a plan already, otherwise he would not have listened so meekly to the men muttering, egging one another, on saying nasty things about him and the commissar too.

After emptying his mug, Borodulin nodded to Chervonenko to pour him another—which was done—and then glanced briefly at the talkers.

"Drink your tea, drink it! It does you good to relax over a cup." He said this with a hint of something in his voice and fell silent again.

Snegirev detected something bigger behind this harmless remark. As commissar, he had nothing to say to the boys and nothing to offer them; but Borodulin, albeit vaguely, was nevertheless promising something. Snegirev flared up:

"You heard what they said? The Pathfinder they called you!"

"Very witty of them!" said Borodulin indifferently, but here too with a hint at one painfully captious driver. And he sighed. "I'm a poor match."

"Then what have you called us here for? What are you hatching?" blurted out the eternally shrill Ostryakov, who had been at the tail-end of the column.

Borodulin barely twitched his eyebrows in his direction.

"You'll have to build up your strength. We've got a rough hour ahead of us..."

"Hour?" Snegirev could have choked at the effrontery of it. "An hour! Twenty-four hours won't be long enough to get out of this mess."

Borodulin pushed back his mug, picked his teeth with a matchstick and lit a cigarette. All finally fell silent; no one was in a hurry to be the first to tangle with him. Wait and see what he had in mind!

"We-e-ll?" Borodulin half turned round to look: was anybody up to something? "If the men weren't grieving that meant they were awaiting orders."

"The people are speechless!" commented Chervonenko with polite actor's superiority.

Borodulin transfixed him with a stare, and the other shuffled off somewhere, melted, dissolved, although there was nowhere for him to put himself.

"Which of you," demanded Borodulin masterfully, "are fishermen? Any here?"

"Yes," responded two or three timidly. "Why?"

"Been to the Yenisei? You have?.. Well, try and remember... What's the Aniva's right bank is like? Steep slopes, terraces, cliffs. Yes? And if anyone of you slept in a tent, why did you stay on the sandy left bank?"

It was true; the right bank was precipitously steep, all along the river from the Rapids to the estuary. Not only fishermen had seen it, and people needed little reminding! The replenishments had come to Barakhsan mainly in the summer, and from the estuary to the settlement they had travelled on barges, so they had had a good look at the banks. And the fishermen loved those familiar places. They usually assembled in convoys of three or four boats, went down the Aniva below Sigovyi Stream, and when several days off came in succession, they even went as far as the

estuary, to the Yenisei. Here the passenger boats droned until the ice formed, and there were more people to be met on the banks. Thanks to such encounters, with long chats round the campfire, a rich fish soup and a noggin of pure spirit—the feeling of loneliness vanished, and so did the sense of isolation of Barakhsan from the big world outside. There were enough fish for everyone, and there was enough space too, although dozens of campfires used to blaze at night on the left bank of the Aniva. Fish soup bubbled in cauldrons and buckets, sleepless transistor radios blared away, and the little bells jingled thinly and sporadically on the fishing tackle. The left bank was hospitable. You could moor at any little headland and you would find sloping shallows with sand here and there, and, what mattered most, the left bank was covered with impenetrable thickets of osiers which were used for campfires. The right bank was luxuriantly overgrown in summer with grasses and reddish green moss. From a distance, it looked beautiful; but if you went up to it in a boat, there was nowhere to tie up; rocks and more rocks, and you could only fish from the boat. In the pools under the cliff hovered fat Siberian salmon, among them were some that could tow the boat along in spite of its heavy anchor and you had to cut the tackle in order not to capsize if the fish was pulling you into the deep whirlpools.

It was pleasant in winter to look back on the fishing, but what was the point of that now?

"The idea is to stop you grousing," explained Borodulin." The whole right bank's like that, starting at the Sigovyi... If we had stayed at base a couple of weeks, we could have gone along the Sigovyi on to the ice straightaway and then driven fast to the river mouth. But the tundra freezes up earlier; that's why they hoped to gain time, and as the crow flies, hell, it wasn't far. They measured it in kilometres; but the tundra has its own units—

days. A straight line to the river mouth is a hundred and a bit—that's five or six days' driving, but we can nip across the rest in two days here. That's why I turned off to the Aniva... And I think I did right."

"No!" answered Snegirev for all of them after a pause. "The Aniva never freezes up from the Rapids to the Sigovyi because of the breakers. You can't go down by the Sigovyi and you can't go up either. It's the wrong terrain."

"You might agree on it between yourselves first, my good friends!" snapped Ostryakov. "And upset everybody afterwards."

"Belt up..." said Borodulin casually and he explained himself to Snegirev. "The Sigovyi near Barakhsan freezes up—not too hard, it's true. If you suggest it to Basov, they'll tamp down the bed with snow or make some ice. There's your entrance and exit for the route..."

"Are you sure that the Aniva will hold us here?"

"Here, in frosts like these, yes," grinned Borodulin.

"I haven't tested the ice..." said Snegirev frowning.

"Then go and try it. Give him a fisherman's drill!"

Snegirev flushed.

"I'll cut through it," he said conciliatingly. "But just how are you going to get down there?"

"Easy!"

"You won't break your neck?"

"I won't, and I won't let anyone else either," Borodulin, now in a really aggressive mood, rose, squared his shoulders and stretched. "Well, brothers, let's go and jump for it. There's no road back anyway..."

Tolya Chervonenko ran to him with the sheepskin jacket, and asked curiously:

"It's about six metres high, Commander. Will there be any parachutes?"

"Of course, there will," and Borodulin smacked him on the rear. Then, seriously: "Volunteers only. I can take all the lorries down myself. I'm not forcing anybody..."

And he walked out of the van. No one budged.

"Shall we go and have a look?" grated Ostryakov.

"Come on, lads!" said Gittaulin. And to Chervonenko: "And how are you going to jump?"

"By parachute, like the commander said!" was the rejoinder.

Even so, Snegirev was the first to go out after Borodulin.

"Everybody's got to jump, or no one," he said, holding the door open. "Not one man on his own..."

"We're already jumping," guffawed Gittaulin, tumbling out of the van. He had not particularly liked the commissar's last words. He did not want to get into an argument with him, but privately he had decided that he wouldn't lag behind Borodulin; not for nothing had he been following in his tracks.

Borodulin paced out the distance to the cliff and, switching on the engine, slowly ploughed a track for the approach run. His men stood over the cliff, looking down, gauging how many times the commander's ZIL would overturn and what to do if the jump failed... If it was a success?! Then they must do it too!

After letting them have a good look and, perhaps, disgusted by their inactivity, Borodulin pushed his head out of the cab and roared:

"Have you come here to flutter your eyelashes, or are you going to work? To your lorries, quick march! Move the column two hundred metres back. I've got no room for the approach run, blast it..." And he swore as if he had to jump from such cliffs every day of the week.

But now seventy metres had been already rolled

and tamped down if not the whole hundred. Borodulin tried to go straight into second gear. It worked. Finally, he stopped on the brink and lit a cigarette.

Snegirev came up.

"Listen, Borodulin, maybe we shouldn't risk it. We'll let you down on cables and untie you at the right moment and..."

"Maybe we shouldn't risk it," repeated Alexei peacefully, agreeing with Snegirev, and suddenly flared up: "A lorry isn't a goat, you can't let it down on a rope!"

Both were silent.

"Don't take it too hard, Commissar," said Alexei, back-tracking quickly. "If I kill myself, everyone'll confirm it was of my own free will... But nothing's going to happen, don't worry! You needn't be scared! I've jumped from bridges in my time..."

"You just hang on a bit," pleaded Snegirev. "We'll go down with spades, only we'll bring a cable..."

"Get going! But keep on one side as you go down..." And he sighed.

Snegirev and four drivers with him wound ropes round themselves and went down the steep bank to the bed of the river. Sinking chest-high in the snow, they struggled on to the Aniva. They stamped their felt boots on the ice and banged with their spades—reinforced concrete...

Borodulin beckoned Gittaulin over.

"Well, Roman, are you going to be second, or?.."

"Second, Borodulin; first, if you want..."

"Then take a slightly longer approach run... And don't be scared, you've jumped on a motorbike."

Borodulin slammed the door shut and opened the throttle. The engine howled wildly, but almost immediately afterwards, as it revved up, began running smoothly. The lorry, as if feeling that it

was in for a short and, perhaps, last dash, strained its iron guts in an extreme effort and rushed towards the cliff, gathering speed, bounding and holding up its nose slightly. The front wheels, deprived of their usual support, whistled as they spun in the frozen air. For another few seconds the lorry went straight on by momentum, and when it had nothing left out but to plunge its bonnet down—at that moment, Borodulin stamped on the accelerator pedal. The rear wheels propelled it suddenly from behind, and from the side it was possible to see the lorry lurch in mid-air, move back a little way and, churning up the snow and whipping it up into a cloud, begin burrowing into a snowdrift, its wheels still spinning and roaring and the polished chains glittering as if a snow-plough was working there at full power. All this took only a split second, until finally, hitting something solid, the front wheels bounced up, and with them the whole cab and body was rocked like a boat by a beam wave. At this point many thought, and not just Snegirev, that Borodulin was going to overturn, but already the back axle was ploughing through the snow, there was support under all the wheels, and no one took any more notice of Borodulin's zigzags; a dozen lusty male voices roared with delight.

Stupefied by the jump, the speed of it, and by the fleeting and already forgotten thought, "Is this really a risk?" Borodulin could not hear the shouting; he could not even see the light of day. His windscreen was plastered with a mush of snow. But feeling solid ground under himself and the lorry, he switched off the ignition and reached over to open the door. It would not budge. What was wrong? Had he really copped it?

When the snow whirlwind had settled, and it was quiet round him, and all were thinking with alarm: "What's happened to Borodulin?" a metallic grating rang out over the river, as if someone

had ripped the living iron apart. Torn off its hinges the door of Borodulin's cab fell out and he appeared in the opening, swearing and wiping his cheek—was it scratched or something? He spat through his teeth and dealt the door a savage kick.

"The bitch! It jammed!"

However, realising that the door was unimportant and everything else was fine, he cupped his mouth in his hands and shouted up to the hill-top.

"Hey, you there! Brace yourselves with your hands and feet... Or you'll be blown out like a bung from a barrel!"

He climbed back into the cab and his trusty old chariot with its torn-off door began screeching and grinding along to make way for the others as quickly as possible.

...Five minutes later, observing the sequence customary for the column, Gittaulin was already below. The lucky Tatar got away with it, as always, more lightly than all the others. Not a scratch! Borodulin gave him a bear-hug and waved to the others:

"Get going, you devils, what are you staring at?"

After Gittaulin came a second lorry, a third, a fifth...

When the eleventh machine flopped down like a pancake on to a table, sparks flew from under the wheels. The downy underlay had long been destroyed. They could have done with a new track, but there was only one more lorry to come... Ostryakov had got stuck up there; perhaps he had guessed the position and was estimating where to roll himself a new track.

"What's up?" shouted Gittaulin derisively, as if he had caught Ostryakov red-handed when he pushed his head over the cliff top and promptly ducked back again. "What are you bobbing up and down like a float for? Step on it. We'll pick the

pieces up afterwards."

The drivers laughed, cheerfully this time and without worrying. Each was sticking his chest out. Borodulin clicked his tongue at them without malice.

"Ostryako-o-ov!" he called.

The other hesitated, but came to the edge of the cliff. He threw his hands apart:

"The engine's making a racket. I can't understand it..."

"Listen, if you're scared, then say so," ordered Borodulin sternly. "I'm serious. Is your eyesight bad?"

"I'm not scared, but I can't cope... I've got the shakes," he admitted. "I won't hold the lorry like that."

"All right, have a smoke up there for the time being!" Borodulin sighed. He would have to climb up the cliff.

"Let me go," volunteered Snegirev.

"What about me, Commander? I'm ready!" Gittaulin stood in front of him.

Alexei did not like trying his luck twice. Stupidity and superstition, of course, since the others had jumped down just like him. Now, when the thing was done, it seemed trivial. But if he didn't have to climb once more up that blasted hill! Could he send them perhaps? Snegirev? The commissar was eager out of happiness. Being happy, he was rash. But Gittaulin was all right. Iron nerves! He had said, "After you, Commander," and he had been as good as his word. He had jumped while the snow-dust was still settling. And with gratitude to Gittaulin, he thought of himself: "It's good to go first when there are others behind you. It isn't enough to go, you still have to wag your tail to make the others run after you... It's a dog's life—being in charge of people," he decided. "If it comes off this time, I shan't try it again. Wild horses won't make me.

I'll bring an excavator, I'll take on Gittaulin as my mate, and *basta*!"

Borodulin's eyes had already given Gittaulin the order to go—it only remained to repeat it aloud and he had already lifted his hand to wave it: "Off you go, Roman, and be quick about it!" But Snegirev, guessing the decision in that sudden raising of the hand to the shoulder, grasped Borodulin by the elbow. He gripped it firmly and looked challengingly into the other man's eyes, as if he knew everything that Borodulin was thinking at that moment, and, catching Snegirev's eye, Borodulin realised that when even only one man in the detachment funked it, he could not and did not have the right to refuse the commissar his place. Borodulin's arm sank limply down again.

"Oh, well," he blurted out weakly. "Toss a coin and decide for yourselves."

He took a coin out of his pocket and dropped it into Snegirev's hand. The other flicked it up with his finger and caught it in mid-flight in his fist.

"Heads you, tails me!" shouted Gittaulin hurriedly, bending right over Viktor's hand.

Borodulin looked from above, over his shoulder. He thought that heads ought to come up. He himself never called tails.

"Tails!"

They slowly followed Gittaulin with their eyes. He scaled the cliff, clinging to a rope thrown down by Ostryakov.

"No, you don't get two heads," said Borodulin regretfully.

"Well," said Snegirev pensively, turning the coin over and putting it in his pocket, "that's the last time I've played and lost..."

There was such sadness in his voice that Borodulin was about to put out his hand for the coin with a smile, thought better of it, and pulled out his cigarettes.

"It wasn't a gamble," he said calmly, "it was

your fate; and you can't avoid it, you can't override it," as if he had guessed Snegirev's recent thoughts. Snegirev flushed.

"You could have given me the right," he replied reproachfully. "For me, it might have meant an achievement..."

"Oh, Snegirev, Vitya..." said Borodulin, wincing as if at toothache. "You have the soul of a commissar. We both have the most ordinary work, and you... Mind you don't tell the lads, or they'll arrange a real epic for you! The heroism'll come later when we get back to Barakhsan. Then you can play your fanfares, tell tall stories and recruit volunteers. But we've got so much spade-work to do at the estuary that we'll be sick of it even without all the fine words."

"It's easy enough for you to say so..."

"What's the matter with you—tongue-tied?" grinned Borodulin.

"Stop taking the mick," smiled Snegirev. "I understand, it's not a matter of words, but even so you were the first to take the risk! And not for the hell of it, we might say. So what was it all in aid of?"

Leaning his broad back against the lorry, Borodulin fastened up his sheepskin coat. He thought, turned the cigarette-end over in his fingers and flicked it angrily a long way into the snow.

"Commissar, go to the masses with you culture! I want to live simply, in an ordinary way..."

"How d'you mean 'simply'?"

"So that they don't keep staring at me and sniffing. I'm a labourer, I'm working under contract, on hire. Here are your terms, here are mine. We've done the job, we reckon up—*basta*! As for the rest, ideas aren't my master, I'm the master of my ideas. I realised it long ago, my friend."

"You've got it all nicely cut and dried."

"Yes, but not behind your back. I know what's mine and what's someone else's."

"And your conscience? Or don't you include that in your reckoning?"

"Conscience?" Borodulin somehow looked miserable and wrapped himself entirely in his coat. "Conscience, Vitya, is a special detonator in each man. If you don't know the secret, don't poke your nose in—it'll get bitten off." And suddenly he added something superfluous but offensive, purely to annoy Snegirev: "I bet you're jealous that the winter road's already in my pocket. But you know where you'd still be crawling along with Ivanetsky!.."

"There you are," laughed Snegirev, surprised that Borodulin's words had not seriously rattled him. "You've just made it to being a leader, but you're already scared of being a failure... That means you're not mature yet. And there are steeper hills than that one." He nodded towards the hill, to the brink of which Gittaulin's ZIL was crawling somewhere above with gathering speed.

As if he had done his job and Snegirev's last words did not concern him, or because the noise of the ZIL reminded him of what he had been through, and the joy of victory had not yet flowed out of his heart—as if intoxicated by it all, he forgave Snegirev for his hot-headedness, opened his coat and, laughing, covered Snegirev with the skirt. The other was so surprised that he could not evade his grasp. When, finally, he released Snegirev, Borodulin said conciliatingly:

"The winner takes all. I only stepped on the gas, the engine did the rest."

And he stroked the cold grey-blue wing of the ZIL with the palm of his hand.

At that moment the lorry pushed its front bumper out over the edge of the cliff, and almost at the very moment when the front wheels should have gone over the edge—only a fraction of an

inch remained—Roman brought the wheel over slightly, the ZIL veered sharply sideways, nearly toppled over and thrashed snow next to the beaten track. The body shook violently, the carelessly lashed empty fuel drums thundered and were all but thrown into the snow... The cab was plastered with snow and the steps had to be dug out, but Gittaulin clambered out looking pleased, wiping his bruised cheekbone, and his eyebrows, as black as leeches, worked on his face, signalling pain and joy, perhaps more at the second jump than at the first.

"Why did you turn the wheel so late?"

"On purpose! Why? See how nicely I've signed my name."

"No one needs your signature here," said Borodulin threateningly. "You'll sign your name in the registry office." He held his fist under the Tatar's quivering nostrils.

Gittaulin grinned.

"Well done, well done," interceded Snegirev. "You judged it right and made a successful jump... We can proceed further!"

"Thanks, you've recognised me at least," grinned Borodulin to himself, but he was pleased that the commissar had not kept quiet this time—one should swear, the other should praise so that there should be a stimulus for people. He didn't mind about the lorries. They were iron; if one of them got smashed, good riddance, there was nowhere for the new ones to go. That's why they were mass produced...

Feeling the steam of his breath stitching his skin with frost needles, Borodulin palmed off the rime that was covering his lips with white and listened. Strange stirrings were audible in the silence. The frosty air over the tundra, as if glazed to a substellar altitude, was solid and stiff—you felt you could squeeze in into a handful or push it aside with your hands like glass wool. At the spot

where the lorries had been jumping from the cliff, an airy void, a pit had formed, and shafts of frozen air were filtering into it now with a sandy rustle. It was as if someone enormous was breathing heavily over the handful of men gathered near Borodulin's lorry. And at once they felt uneasy near the cliffs, bristling as they were with black tusks from which the snow was falling. Then another sound, sharp and prolonged, like a rifle-shot, exploded between the banks, the echo threw it reverberatingly at the cliffs and they threw it back, like a wave, far away. The men looked up in surprise, staring at the cliffs, at the black depths of the grey sky, seeking the cause—perhaps a rock had come loose or a jet plane had broken the sound barrier—but all was motionless and quiet, and they guessed that it was the ice that had cracked, unable to withstand the shocks. A minute or two passed in expectation—the silence remained calm as before, but their alarm did not fade until the air itself calmed down and they could hear the lorry engines idling. They felt warmed by this familiar, customary sound.

Ostryakov, now bold again, with a rope wound round his elbow, slid whooping down from the top. He fell into the snow, but got out and, running up to Borodulin and his comrades, exclaimed in an unnaturally loud voice:

"Mates, it's the ice cracking... What a bang!"

"Fireworks in your honour," said Borodulin casually and turned away, adding: "Shut up, or you'll go back the mainland—there won't be a word left in your stock."

"I bet there will," said Ostryakov offendedly, but he had the sense to keep quiet.

From the half-contemptuous tone in which Borodulin spoke, all understood that their commander was taking the unsuccessful jumper under his wing. And no one thought that each of them could find himself in Ostryakov's position even

now... Excited by this thought, and perhaps by a feeling of responsibility for the fate of people who trusted him, a feeling he had not known before, Alexei Borodulin hastened to reassure Ostryakov and the others.

"Rubbish! The Aniva's a bit out of tune after the jumps... If the ice really cracked, it'd be deep bangs, one after another, and the water would shoot up like a fountain. On this ice"—he stamped for conviction with his felt boot—"we might just as well be on the Moscow-Simferopol motorway!"

"Could we break for a smoke?" asked someone.

"And a snooze," said several voices in support.

"Let's get to our lorries, lads!" said Borodulin with a gesture. "First we'll spread out the column—distance from the leader, twenty to twenty-five metres, then we'll assemble in the van."

And he ran his eyes round the company.

"Chervonenko?"

Cringing with cold under someone else's sheepskin coat because he had jumped out of the lorry in a hurry just for a minute without his hat, Chervonenko covered his ears with his red hands. On hearing Borodulin's call, he showed the highest mental resource of which he was capable. Without asking what Borodulin wanted, he saluted him smartly.

"To hear is to obey, Commander!"

"A hundred and fifty grammes each, no more," shouted Borodulin after him. "Okay, Commissar?"

Snegirev, who was indifferent to such things, silently agreed.

Looking at Viktor Snegirev's young, nervously relaxed face, usually lively and cheerful, but now with dark hollows under the eyes, you could believe that he was more tired than the rest. With this jump on to the ice, which had seemed

impossible an hour ago but which had now opened up a straight route to the river mouth, he was feeling inexplicably sad. He understood the joy of the weary men, cheered up not by the expected hundred and fifty grammes of Arctic liquor ration, but by the knowledge that their bad times were over. The worst was behind them. They were magnanimous now, and no one even had a go at Ostryakov. They would remember that day more than once, and the route and Borodulin with his ski jump would one day go from reality into legend for them... He did not envy Borodulin. But ever since his own lorry had been left behind to freeze in the tundra, he had been ashamed of their reproaches. Others had prevailed over the ice hummocks, the squeezes, the ice-bubbles. He had had rather to work with a pick; he frenziedly pierced the frozen snow with it and his imprecations and curses were as inadequate as they were sincere.

"Labour feat!" laughed the boys, pointing at his bleeding palms.

In fact, he was a long way from a feat here. To save someone else from disaster was simply a duty now, as Tolya Chervonenko had at once commented. He could be right... It never occurred to Snegirev himself, who had once and for all, it seemed, divided the world into two camps, into two colours, that the feeling of relief, of joy, the feeling of solace, mingled also with bitterness that his comrades were experiencing as they celebrated their "touch-down" on the Aniva, could be higher than a sense of having achieved the final goal; but they had not yet reached the warehouses. Moreover, their winter road was only the beginning of a big operation, and it would not be easy transporting from the estuary all the cargoes to the last case, to the last nut, bolt and rivet! And he wanted to foresee everything now so that there would not be any hang-ups afterwards or lorries

dropping out on the trip. He tried to analyse, tried to understand when and why Borodulin had decided to change the route. He remembered how, after Ivanetsky's departure, he had gone up to Borodulin with an unfolded map and had asked:

"Well, Commander, which way shall we go?"

The commander, disdaining to look at the map or to consider the arguments prepared by Snegirev, had calmly replied:

"There're lots of turns, but only one road..."

This sentence did not seem haphazard now; he found a meaning in it that he had not grasped before. After all, not only on the route, but in life: there were many turns, but only one road! Someone gets ahead, you get in someone's way, someone gets in yours... How could you be sure that you had not blocked someone else's passage? And what sort of a person must be the one whom thousands or millions follow?

Declining a drink, Snegirev wandered round the van, listening to the strange squeaking of the snow under foot, like starch in a glass jar. Behind the wall he could hear the confused voices of the boys, drunk with fatigue and Arctic allowance. Tolya Chervonenko, louder than all, suddenly struck up in his tenor voice:

Where the tall summer corn is a-swaying,
Our poor village is vanished from sight...

Someone with a low voice joined in, out of tune. Chervonenko stopped the singing—no good! As if waking up, everybody in the van started talking together, as if a wind had risen. And, before all was still and quiet, the cook struck up again:

Bitter grief round the land is a-straying...

Picking the catchy theme, Snegirev set off along the column. Peering into the gloomy, silent night

and at the bank, its smooth outlines blurred, for some reason he imagined not the tundra, not the Arctic, but the unbounded remoteness of the green steppes, and it seemed to him that if he listened, perhaps a quail would call or a skylark would twitter, rising over the dewy grass higher than the dusk, somewhere into the sky beyond the clouds on which the dawnglow was already playing.

He felt warm, his cheeks burned; he raised his ear flaps and suddenly realised that he could hear the thin ringing of bells like a mosquito's whine. "I'm imagining things... Hallucinations already. Better get into the lorry!"

"Snegirev, you haven't been drinking, but aren't you sort of drunk?" was Borodulin's jovial greeting. Himself he looked as if he had also not been drinking, although ... his mug was up-ended.

"There's a bell jingling outside," admitted the bewildered Snegirev. "I rubbed my ears with snow, but it went on ringing just the same. Am I imagining it or something?"

The boys laughed understandingly. They forgave him for his little joke.

"Tatar!" ordered Borodulin in a deliberately loud voice. "Why are you cringing at the table? Go outside and listen..."

"Why me?" he said, offended.

"You can see in the dark like a lynx!"

"Huh!" was all Gittaulin said, but he went out. He returned a minute later.

"There's something jingling!" he confirmed dispassionately.

"Any other volunteers to be convinced?" Borodulin looked at the boys, who were in fits of laughter. "You devils, I'll have to go myself... All right, have your fun in here," he said condescendingly. "We'll be moving off soon..."

And from the last quickly spoken words, Snegirev grasped that Borodulin was not relaxing but was thinking about what lay in store for them

and had decided to get going.

The logs crackled in the stove, the dim twelve-volt lamps shone over the table and behind the stove where Chervonenko kept his kitchen utensils. Pulling faces, winking, jokingly shushing one another, smoking Prima cigarettes, the drivers, mellow after their supper, were casting curious glances at Gittaulin and Snegirev, suspecting them of a plot. It was on the cards that Borodulin would come back and also confirm the jingling. Hark at him faking up different voices. Now his own, now a quicker one, like a woman's; but they couldn't hear the words.

On returning, Borodulin glanced cheerfully at Snegirev, and there was a distracted bewilderment in his voice.

"Either the local deity's dropped in on us for a feast or a Chukchi... And he keeps chanting, 'O *lyosa* Soviets, *lyosa* Soviets...' like a talking doll. And for some reason," he continued bewilderedly, "he's tied the reindeer to my lorry, to my front bumper..." He shook his head critically. "Does anyone here talk the local lingo?"

"I do," said Chervonenko, jumping up. "I can translate from the Martian. If, of course, they speak Russian."

"You and your Martian! Perhaps our little Tatar friend?"

Gittaulin grinned foolishly.

When Borodulin repeated the familiar intonation, "lyosa Soviets, lyosa Soviets", Snegirev's heart contracted as if at something long known and dear to him.

"Is that true?" he asked.

"Will you never believe me, you Doubting Thomas?"

"That's Vantulyaku, master of the tundra..." He jumped up, looking for his hat which he had mislaid somewhere.

The stubborn Chervonenko, who was not willing

to admit that the joke was over and had hidden the hat behind his back, asked:

"The master with the bells is a shaman or something?"

"Shaman yourself," smiled Snegirev, finally spotting his hat.

Outside, there was a hesitant scratching at the door. The boys were silent, but someone was already squeezing inside with a cloud of frosty steam; altogether it looked like a human being—squat, on two feet, hands apart, clad neither in sheepskin nor furs, but in something like bearskin. His face was crowned by a fluffy fur hood covered with rime. The first drops quickly thawed and glittered like gems, and it was possible to see the visitor's merry, slanting eyes. He nodded joyously in all directions, ceremoniously bowed and said:

"*Lyosa* Soviets, o *lyosa* Soviets, barakhsan, barakhsan!"

"Vantulyaku, is it you?" Snegirev went up to the old man and held out both hands to him.

"However, I am Vantulyaku," smiled the Nganasani. "Who are you?"

"Don't you recognise me? You remember Barakhsan? The Aniva? The Rapids? D'you remember *Lyosa* Basov? You remember Anya?" He had involuntarily dropped into call-sign language to make himself understood. "I'm Vitya Snegirev—advance team!" he shouted at the old man's face, and he opened the sheepskin jacket, as if it was all that prevented the old man from recognising him.

Vantulyaku nodded in agreement and smiled. He obediently allowed the lads gathered round him to help him off with his parka, and, without losing sight of Snegirev, in a low voice, as if to himself, repeated:

"*Lyosa* Basov I remember, *lyosa* Anya I remember, *lyosa* Aniva I remember and the

advance team I remember... However, you!"—he prodded Snegirev with his finger—"Why shout? Why frighten the tundra? I remember you just the same. You clickety-click—cinema!" And unexpectedly, with deadly accuracy, he mimicked Snegirev with a camera in his hands. "You are Vitya, yes, however, so?"

"Ye-e-es!" said Viktor delightedly, and explained to the others: "We've known one another since the first advance team. He gave us a name for the town... And when he was photographed with us, he kept saying 'Cinema, cinema...'"

Vantulyaku had already been sat at the table. Without interrupting the speaker, he was breaking off the soft part of the slice of bread with his fingers, trying frozen veal and sausage meat and stroking the half-litre aluminium mug full of steaming tea which Chervonenko had produced. He kept on trying it, but seemed embarrassed or was waiting for something and not eating. Finally, realising that his hospitable hosts must be prompted, he drew the vinous air deep into his lungs and angrily assailed Snegirev:

"Give cinema, Vitya. You said there would be cinema!"

"Yes, but in Barakhsan!" said Snegirev trying to explain, but the old man wasn't even listening.

"Ai-ai-ai! No cinema, no spirit... Give spirit; there's spirit, however."

All the boys held their sides. What a grand old man! One for taking the bull by the horns!

Chervonenko, to whom Borodulin's glance was like a slap in the face, obliged instantly.

"Barakhsan, barakhsan, barakhsan," praised Vantulyaku, now sipping from the other mug. He added some boiled water to the spirit, shook the mug slightly and downed the contents. After drinking, he mooed for a long time in amazement, then wiped his mouth with his sleeve, Russian style.

"That's the Northern Lights for you!" said Chervonenko with delight.

A piece of meat halfway to his mouth, the old man began to explain suddenly:

"Vantulyaku, however, is fleeing away from Vachug. And the reindeer are running nimbly. And the cold is not behind them, it is also running nimbly. The frost is like a *kocha,* cra-a-a-afty"—the old man winked cunningly, "where a needle has passed, there the *kocha* goes; where the *kocha* goes, there the frost goes. It will go into a parka, settle in the bone, but Vantulyaku, however, sings. Once he sings, twice he sings—the words end, but the frost does not go away. His teeth chatter and the frost chatters too. Vantulyaku is cra-a-afty. He glug glass and cold—whooch—gone! Well done, Vantulyaku. Is it not so, however, *lyosa* Vitya?"

"Yes, but eat, Vantulyaku," said Snegirev.

In thought he was far away, remembering the first meeting with the old man when there had not been any settlement on the site of the present Burakhsan; there had not even been a name, just an Army felt-lined tarpaulin tent standing on the bank, and the advance team had been living with the free foreknowledge of a great beginning which it was for them to bring to completion...

At the table, meanwhile, an unhurried conversation was in progress—the drivers were hospitable, but also curious. Vantulyaku was telling them that he was on his way to the winter's hunting. This year he had been sick from the end of summer, had missed the last water and he was now going after the sables by reindeer. He had gone down to the Aniva below the Rapids so as to miss Burakhsan, since he had many *lyosa* friends there. They would hold him up and the journey would then be very long and it is impossible: the king sable would not wait for Vantulyaku; he would go to another trapper...

The lads offered in fun to give him a lift to the mouth of the Aniva. They had plenty more spirit, a whole canister. To which Vantulyaku objected with dignity:

"To feed a reindeer, no spirit needed. To feed a reindeer, however, seek the reindeer moss, seek the grass, cut snow with hoof..." And he sighed. "However, life is hard to bear in winter..."

For many kilometres around every trapper knows his fellow tribesmen, and the Chukchi, the Nganasani and the Oduli knew Vantulyaku and his family. Now they went trapping in teams, a helicopter flew to them for the pelts and perhaps only Vantulyaku loved solitude as before. Hence, a meeting with man in the tundra was a festival for him, reducing the days of separation. The young do not always understand this, and when the soul already feels the chill of the valley of the shadow from which there is no return, then you involuntarily hide from the young bloods your envy of them, ignoring their jokes that are like the barking of a mangy dog. Even a dog learns in time, however. Vantulyaku could have said all this to the quick-eyed *lyosa*, but, as grass does not grow on a stone, so words do not take root in the soul if a man has not drunk the cup of suffering.

Seeing that Vantulyaku had fallen into a reverie, Snegirev piled several sheepskin coats up behind the stove and offered the old man a lie-down. The other thanked him and fell asleep almost at once.

Roman Gittaulin, who had been silently watching the Nganasani from a dark corner of the van, said pensively:

"Old men are all the same for some reason—Russians and Tatars. They understand everything, only they can't say it all. Probably because they've forgotten the words already."

"Come off it, Roman," drawled Ostryakov. "You'll be one yourself soon. Less of the chin-wagging, and everything'll be fine."

"Stop that!" intervened Borodulin, "you've been sitting there long enough already, so have a nap for another half hour," and he came over and sat down near Snegirev.

"Listen, Viktor, I've had an idea..."

"Idea or action?" grinned the other, sensing the impatience in Borodulin's voice.

"Action," agreed the other. "And except for you, there's no one to take it on. Go back to Barakhsan... Report the situation, and above all make them speed up the bridge over Sigovyi Stream. They'll have to drill and blast the banks, but time's short!"

"I know, I was thinking the same..."

"So we agree?"

"Yes, but what transport? My own two pins?"

"You'll have to bribe the old man..."

"Vantulyaku?" Viktor was astonished and offended. "There's no bribing him. He's a Nganasani with principles."

"Promise him some snapshots, and he'd even rush you to the Crimea..."

"And back?"

"Back with him too—he's heading for the estuary! Besides, the ideological side is your department..."

"Very well," agreed Snegirev after a moment's thought. "I'll explain to him why it's necessary, but I'm not going to try and persuade him. It's the wrong occasion and the wrong man for that. Generally speaking, it's not done in the tundra to persuade and ask"—he remembered Basov's remark on a similar subject—"it's unethical. You understand, Borodulin, a man must decide for himself whether to help you out or not."

"All right, don't make a meal of it, get ready... Chervonenko!" he shouted, "fix him up with a rucksack for the road."

Snegirev began packing the rucksack himself. Borodulin silently watched his hurried movements,

but did not volunteer any advice. As he tied up the laces at the neck, Snegirev said bleakly:

"You argue offensively, Alexei, and that's why the men find you difficult."

"Is that wrong?"

"The joke is that you're sometimes right..." And he waved his hand. "When d'you reckon to be back?"

"In four days, or five at the latest. Yes, let them meet us in five days."

"Should I order banners and a red carpet to the platform?"

"No need, we'll manage with a brass band... And it wouldn't be a bad idea to stoke up the bath-house fire. As that old man of yours says, we'll be driving the cold out of our bones. Take a spare sheepskin, I'll bring it right away." Borodulin stood up. "It'll be draughty on the sledge. Good luck, it's not like Gittaulin's cab."

"He's already found that out," Snegirev looked away. "How did he manage to be so clever?"

Before the transparent dawn in the tundra, when the snows become distinguishable—as if they were not snows yet, but frost that had settled on the bottom of the deep night—before that moment of dawn, Snegirev had about an hour left. Neither the column nor Vantulyaku would start out earlier. It was possible to get some sleep now, but what sort of sleep? He was feeling jittery, the boys were nattering away, and their conversation was about the rather eccentric Vantulyaku. They were amazed that such a decrepit old man could have given a name to the city.

"What's amazing about it?" asked Snegirev. "D'you know who was in the advance team?"

They answered him variously, but several of them were already sitting nearer him, and he smiled as he guessed what they wanted.

"It was our second day on the Aniva. While we were putting up the tent and covering the stores

with tarpaulin, we hadn't thought of a name, although we'd already driven in the stake..."

"It was Vasily Ivanovich Korostylev who did it," prompted Tolya Chervonenko.

"Yes, Korostylev..."

...The whole thing began with him deciding to test his skis and managing to get lost in the tundra. We waited an hour, then another, then we fired a warning shot—no Korostylev. We had to assemble for a search. Suddenly there was a shout... We all rushed out of the tent, and there was a reindeer team coming towards us. Korostylev was waving a goad, and Vantulyaku was sitting beside him and grinning from ear to ear.

Korostylev was delighted.

"I say to him, 'You like porridge?' 'I like it.' 'Going to eat?' 'Going to eat.' 'Shall we start?' 'Let's start!'"

The old nan was returning from a trapping expedition and was amazed to meet a *lyosa* man near the Rapids.... He almost thought that a *kocha* had blurred his vision, but Korostylev's promise to feed him with sweet porridge had dispelled that first impression.

In the tent, at the sight of the cheerful, white-toothed braves, Vantulyaku lost his shyness. He told about himself, how his camp was on Lake Vachug, where the Aniva was born and from which it run as swift as a reindeer. Then the advance team began explaining to him that they had come to build a dam and block the Aniva. The old man listened respectfully for a long time, thought it over, painstakingly knitting his brows; either he didn't understand anything, or he didn't believe them.

"So-o-o-o," he said and promptly objected to himself: "However, it isn't so."

He thought a bit more.

"A dog, however, goes in harness. A reindeer goes in harness. Man goes in harness. The

Aniva... The Aniva does not go in harness. It will burst the strongest *maut.*"

"But why don't you believe that we'll stop the Aniva? Man can do everything!" exclaimed Anya with a tremor in her voice, sincerely annoyed by the old man's derision. And she tried to explain it all clearly and convincingly.

"However, you are a fine *vazhenka.*" Taking his pipe out of his mouth, Vantulyaku gave her a friendly smile and stretched out his hand towards her golden hair, but he did not touch it, merely passing the palm of his hand near it. "Barakhsan, barakhsan, *vazhenka,* yes, however!" He winked at her. "Vantulyaku knows what he is saying."

The team members also smiled. When he said it, *"vazhenka"* sounded very pleasing, but they were wrong in taking the word to be a corruption of the Russian *vazhnaya*[1].

Nikita, who happened to know, explained:

"Vazhenka is the doe. Applied to a woman"—and he smiled faintly at Anya—"it's just about the highest possible compliment to her beauty..."

"Is he proposing to Anna Odarchenko, then?" grinned Korostylev; for which he would have got a kick in the shins had it not been for old man's presence.

But Vantulyaku, looking at her, kept saying in various tones, "Barakhsan, barakhsan..." and smiling.

Alimushkin joined in the conversation.

Guessing that he was a big *lyosa* chief, the old man changed from a good-natured, crafty trapper into a strict, prim elder. He did not interrupt Alimushkin, did not ask any questions and did not even exclaim, "So!" and "However!" as before, sat with the look of an obedient schoolboy on the low camp-bed which he evidently found most comfortable. His long, dry hands, ridged with

[1] Important (Russ.)— *Tr.*

veins like thongs, lay meekly and quietly on his knees. His face was motionless and inscrutable like a graven image in stone. Only when Alimushkin who had by now despaired of evoking an answering spark from the old man, said: "Here, where we're sitting, there's going to be a big town!.." Vantulyaku's face twitched, his eyes danced like a float on calm water and he asked:

"Town? However, what is that?"

It was hard to believe that Vantulyaku hadn't a notion of what a town was, but Alimushkin sprinkled a handful of cartridges out of a tin and stood one of them on end.

"This is the camp on Lake Vachug, understand?"

"So-o-o." The old man nodded.

"This is another camp, and another, and another..." Alimushkin set up the cartridges in a row. "Understand?"

"So-o-o. Very many people, however, necessary. But you not many," he frowned, "like fingers on hand."

"Correct," laughed Alimushkin. "There will be people." He raked up the cartridges and arranged them in a ring. "This is our camp, a town! It'll be here!" and he tapped the ground with the toe of his feet. "On the Aniva. All clear, yes?"

"Huh!" said Vantulyaku in amazement. "The *Ivosa* have many camps in the tundra. There's Dudinka..."

"Yes," agreed Alimushkin.

"*Lyosa* Igarka..."

"There is."

"*Lyosa* Norilsk..."

"There is, and there'll be many more towns!" Alimushkin was delighted that the old man understood him.

Korostylev sat down opposite Vantulyaku. "Vantulyaku, come here next year. We'll give you a flat with all mod. cons: central heating, hot

water, and a toilet. As in the best houses in Paris... There'll be a parquet floor—you'll light your campfire inside the hut."

"Ba-rakh-san!" exclaimed Vantulyaku in amazement, and he clicked his tongue. He thought and again said to the general laughter: "Barakhsan!"

"Nikita Leontievich, what is the 'barakhsan'?" asked Snegirev. He was too shy to ask the old man directly.

Basov shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know."

"Ah-h-h," drawled Vantulyaku, "who knows the tundra, he knows barakhsan..."

And he began to explain as follows: "*Lyosa vazhenka* Anya—barakhsan," and he bowed towards Basov and Alimushkin so that each could accept that bow: "However, stern *lyosa* chief—barakhsan... Young reindeer"—and he prodded Snegirev in the chest with his finger—"barakhsan, he'll be a fine *shagzhoi*—barakhsan. The sun"—and he raised his arms heavenwards—"barakhsan! Spring—barakhsan! How are you, you live well—barakhsan..."

"Everything's barakhsan!" Basov and Alimushkin exchanged glances.

"However, yes," agreed Vantulyaku wisely. "When everything good, then—barakhsan."

"And our town"—and Korostylev nodded at the cartridge that Alimushkin was thoughtfully rattling in the palm of his hand—"is also barakhsan?"

"Barakhsan, barakhsan," smiled Vantulyaku.

"You're a communist grandfather," laughed Korostylev. "Barakhsan! It's a good word, eh, lads? Shall we use it?"

"You see!" Anya brightened up and looked round at everybody, her face shining. "And we were quarrelling over the name! That's it! Beautiful! Beautiful! Local colour, and absolutely original. I suggest we vote on it, and let's not hear any

more about commonplace names like Cheryomushki!"

Basov and Alimushkin could see from the faces of the boys that the proposal had already been adopted. And Korostylev bobbed up again.

"Tell us, Anya, what gender is it?"

"Masculine!" rasped twenty voices without demur.

"But you wanted it feminine... Gentle, poetic, eh?"

"Anyway," said Basov, putting a stop to this, "get some champagne from the emergency stores. Without breaking the prohibition regulations, we shall make a point of celebrating the birth of Barakhsan. Thanks to you, Vantulyaku," he pressed the old man's dry hand with feeling. "Barakhsan?"

"Barakhsan," agreed the other with dignity.

They decided to present the old man with some keepsakes; one gave him a knife, the other a notebook and pencil. Vitya Snegirev photographed them all in a group. Anya went round whispering an appeal to the boys:

"Give me something suitable for the old man. I haven't got anything, and he'll be hurt."

"You give him this," blurted out Korostylev indifferently, but he bent over with an eloquently feminine movement, covering his chest as if holding up a falling dress. The effect was shattering. Anya couldn't help smiling. But she went up to him, gripped his neck in her slender hand and squeezed it until her fingertips went white.

"Another joke like that," she murmured, "you'll really have something to cry about."

"I understand," he croaked, and, when she released him, added: "In future I'll call such things by their names."

Snegirev would have given a lot for Anya to have touched him like that, even as a joke, but he would not for anything in the world have dared to

repeat Korostylev's movement. Korostylev called her again.

"Anya!" He pulled out of his rucksack a bundle of little bells intended for fishing. "Perhaps this is the most feminine present—what d'you think?"

Anya planted a kiss on Korostylev's cheek.

Vantulyaku was delighted with the bells. He had long been asking his chairman to get him some so that the tundra would know Vantulyaku by them. Although he sings, but how can you sing for long when you're old and your throat has shrivelled to the size of a bottle-neck. He took the bells to his sledge and came back with a skin turned inside out. Letting it soften in the warmth, the old man turned the fur back again. The black sable with the silver stripe on its back shone and shimmered in the light. Vantulyaku gently straightened the soft, flowing streams with his rough hand and threw the skin over Anya's shoulder.

"Barakhsan! The strongest of the Nganasani shall fight for you, as a wild reindeer fights for the young female."

When the old man left, Snegirev very much wanted to have a ride in the sledge and try steering with one rein, but he would never have asked, so as not to admit that he was still a boy at heart. But Basov had confessed to it, and for some reason no one thought he was a boy at heart...

Two hours later, Vantulyaku and Snegirev got ready for the journey. In farewell, the old man suddenly warned Borodulin:

"However, my reindeer will catch up with your iron. Right, shall we go, Vitya?"

"Yes, Vantulyaku, let's!"

Giving the reins a sharp tug and releasing them again, Vantulyaku whooped at the *vachazhny*, who arched his chest as if leaping. After him, but slightly sideways, with a bound, the other reindeer

pulled at the sledge and went off at a smooth, spanking pace. The sledge began creaking in an angry monotone, cleaving the snow with its sharp runners. Uneasily glancing again and again at the old man's round, motionless shoulders, Viktor thought that Vantulyaku had dozed off, and then God knows where the reindeer would take them. He shouted to the old Nganasani that travel over the snow-powdered ice hardly tired the reindeer at all. Lifting one shoulder and without even looking round, Vantulyaku did not agree with him:

"The reindeer, however, get tired from the journey as the tongue from chattering. Each *kyoss* pulls the sinews like a weight," he mumbled, and Snegirev thought that the old man had learned to speak Russian quite well. True, himself he did not immediately remember that a *kyoss* was a unit of length, but Vantulyaku's meaning got through to him after an interval.

He could neither object nor agree when Vantulyaku said drily:

"Have some sleep, however. The journey is long. Little of life is left. I must think. Must think much. Do not hinder an old man. Do not cross the path of his thoughts. It will break off and be lost many times. Much strength needed to find it again."

"Very well, very well, Vantulyaku," agreed Snegirev hastily, but as he dozed and glanced while dozing at the driver's bowed back, he unworthily suspected more than once that the other was also asleep, but he did not dare disturb him.

Occasionally, as if coming round, Vantulyaku would begin singing something of his own, a dismal Nganasani refrain quite out of keeping with the sprightly jingling of the Barakhsan bells. Even then Snegirev was silent, listening to the hooves of the reindeer clicking like a taxi-meter. On the

turns, he barely managed to dodge the sharp divots of snow that flew from under the reindeer's hooves. They often came to stretches on the river where the wind had blown everything away down to the last snowflake, polishing the ice to the smoothness of a mirror. The sledge would skid and swing violently and it was dangerous to doze off; a sleepy man could be thrown out of the sledge, and when would the old man notice? Not once, all the way to Barakhsan, as it seemed, did he look round at the young man whose eyes were bleary with lack of sleep and wild, futile thoughts.

The news that Viktor Snegirev had raced into Barakhsan by reindeer team quickly ran round the settlement, although he could only be seen on Lomonosov Avenue, and even then by only a few. But when the sledge drove up to the management office, the curious came running up to stare. Snegirev's return from the winter road did not come as a surprise to those who grasped that there must be weighty reasons for this, and they assembled at Basov's without having to be sent for.

From the window of Basov's office, the young builders could be seen swarming on to the snowy square in front of the office where Vantulyaku stopped his reindeer and, pulling some hay from the stack behind the pharmacy, threw it by the armful to the snorting muzzles of the reindeer. Larking about and jostling one another, the boys and girls crowded round the sledge and it wasn't hard to guess that they regarded Vantulyaku and his reindeer as a wonder, and it wasn't hard to guess what they were talking and dreaming about. Grown-ups, specialists and experts, they had still so much of the childlike, no, not childlike, say rather the youthful enthusiasm, for which you do not even imagine that there could be room in the North. Of course, Basov knew that most of them

had come to the Arctic for the work, well aware that it would be extremely hard; but what could you do if the difficulties were not as romantic as in the books, and to prevail over the ordinary ones called for twice or three times the courage. Not everyone would hold out and not everyone was able to bear the ordinary hardships. But there it wasn't enough to survive, work off a spell and roll off back home. To become attached to the North meant prevailing over many inner temptations and weaknesses, and those who succeeded must have character and an understanding of the fact that, just as the strongest iron ages without work and stress, so a healthy people cannot let its powers to waste away for nothing. They, after all, are the people.

Listening to Snegirev's account of the latest events on the Aniva, Basov caught himself out thinking that he liked Borodulin's drive even in spite of the hidden irritation and dissatisfaction discernible behind Snegirev's words. Borodulin had Siberian, Barakhsan guts, it was impossible not to understand that, having sent Snegirev to Barakhsan, Borodulin had taken on all the responsibility, believing that it was within his powers. So much more interesting it was to work with such a man!

What is interest? It has many shades, and if you asked those people staring at the reindeer, each would say: "Is it possible to love the North without having spent at least one Arctic night here, the more so a white one, without having seen the Northern Lights, which are a mystery to everyone? Just try and explain it!" And in summer, crowds of these cranks set off with picks and shovels for the tundra to dig down to the permafrost. Someone might have the luck to find a mammoth, as if they were there at every step. It is the lure of the unknown, that is where the root of the interest lies. Suppressing a smile, Basov

watched the girls timidly hold out pieces of sugar and bread to the foaming lips of the reindeer. Vantulyaku, no less dazed than the reindeer by the hubbub, did not know how to extricate himself from the crush. He got annoyed with them. The old man poked his long, bony finger into the chest of one, then another, then a third—you, you, you—put several people on the sledge and picking up the reins, goaded the reindeer. The squealing girls jumped back, and the boys hung on to the sledge in a bunch.

In Basov's office, Snegirev was being given his last instructions. Silin was promising some kind of bridge over the Sigovyi Stream, others were pestering him with requests for things to be brought urgently from the estuary.

Snegirev's eyes were puffy, red and swollen. His skin, chapped by the freezing air, was as tight as a stocking on his face. He was exhausted by his unorthodox journey, but he was behaving like a hero. In a kind of way, he was the hero of the day.

"So Vantulyaku's waiting for you, is he?" asked Basov cheerfully, moving away from the window.

Snegirev nodded calmly:

"Yes. We'll catch up the convoy at the estuary".

"What do you intend to do there?"

"How d'you mean?" Snegirev was dismayed by the question. The answer was so obvious that he did not know how to put it. On the other hand, Basov's words could be taken as an invitation to stay in Barakhsan.

"No, no," said Snegirev hastily. "Since I started out, my place is there. To the last," he added firmly, standing his ground and determined not to give way.

"A matter of honour," resumed Basov thoughtfully, apparently agreeing, and he wearily rubbed the bridge of his nose—a sure sign that he did not really agree with the reply at all.

Basov returned slowly to his place and nodded to Snegirev to take a seat. He lit a cigarette, but the others were already on the alert (after all, the constant habits speak no less than words). Without disclosing the most important thing of all and perhaps still pondering his decision, Basov said:

"Vantulyaku must be given a good dinner. See to that, Lyuba," he said to Evdokimova, his secretary. "I'll see him off after dinner. He has his own business to attend to—trapping; so let him go."

"And me?" asked Snegirev in a sinking voice.

"Viktor, write a note to Borodulin and tell him get a move on. Vantulyaku can deliver it. The crossing over Sigovyi Stream will be ready in time, won't it, Gavrila Panteleimonovich? I warned you and Korostylev to get cracking!"

Silin cleared his throat.

"We're doing the job..." confirmed Korostylev joylessly.

"Good. In two days, at eleven hundred hours a new column will make that crossing—to the river mouth!"

"No, Nikita Leontievich, I don't agree," objected Snegirev. "I shan't stay. Let me leave now."

"Please Viktor, go home! Have a day's rest. There's nothing for you to do with Borodulin. You can lead the second convoy, if you still have the energy. I'm not insisting, but..."

The man should have been pleased, but he flared up.

"You're always like that," Snegirev made a gesture of despair. "You won't let me finish a single job properly. As if I were worse than the others..."

And, ruffling up his hair, he jumped to his feet and headed for the door. He was offended. "Agreement or no agreement," he said, mimicking

Basov. But he'll go of his own accord, and that's that! You try to do your best, but now..."

In the five paces that lay between him and the door which had to be passed through under the stares of his friends, Snegirev's shoulders slumped, his step lost its springiness and confidence, and if he had been called he would have stopped; he would have probably returned and, aloof from it all, would have sat through the conference. But no one made that move, Basov regarded his behaviour calmly, and Viktor finally found himself in the corridor.

Watching Snegirev with tired grey eyes and the door that slammed behind him, Basov said, as if answering his own thoughts:

"It'll be over when we start the generators. But who's going to pull the switch? Probably not Basov, but Snegirev." Smiling he raised his voice. "Well, comrades, let's get back to our sheep, shall we? Things don't run themselves..."

Borodulin's column was heading for Barakhsan, and another, led by Snegirev, was already on the way to meet it. Two more were being made ready. To keep the route in operation all the time, nearly all the lorries had been taken off the sites. The drivers on the route changed every six to eight hours, up to two or three days without leaving the cab. A closed repair van nosed from one end of the road to the other like a shuttle, and it was perhaps harder for the mechanics than anyone else. The lorries could not take the excessive loads, they had to be repaired in the wind and the cold. The men got tired, but the route kept going. The barrier was lowered only during days of violent blizzards. There are many lost working days in the Arctic, and so no sooner had tolerable weather set in than they had to hurry to make up for the lost time. It was ascertained fairly quickly that to maintain order on the route, it was

essential to subordinate the actions of all the men in the four columns and the repair gang to a single leader. Deciding on the future head of the route, Basov wavered between Borodulin and Snegirev. He hoped that Borodulin's appointment would be backed by Silin, but the chief mechanic reacted coldly to his proposal, without any of his former interest.

"I have my doubts about him," he said bluntly.

"He started the winter road, he got the route going, and now you think he'll be a flop." Basov raised his eyebrows and reminded the other: "You proposed him."

"He might flop and he might not, but he'll hardly agree. He is a deep one. I'm afraid he isn't socially aware enough..."

"You're confusing the issue, Gavrila Panteleimonovich! We all are deep ones, so put it more clearly. We're giving him scope, initiative..."

"As for him and that initiative..." Silin sighed and said nothing for a moment. "I had him in mind myself too. But after the first run, before his lorry had even cooled, he came up to me in a hurry: had I forgotten about the excavator? He wanted me to transfer him."

"Why to an excavator?" said Basov, bewildered.

"I'd sort of promised him once," admitted the chief mechanic. "And it wasn't enough for him to come on his own, he brought along a couple more fellows with him—the crew... He's not in step with the time."

Nikita became thoughtful. It was clear that Borodulin and Silin were not on friendly terms. It was one thing to apply for work, another to do the job. And the facts: Borodulin's column had lost fewer machines than the others; it had substantially reduced loading and unloading times; high output in tonne-kilometres, and, as a result, a high turnover for the convoy as a whole. All the

convoys were supposed to do three or four trips, and during that same period he had done five. Borodulin's convoy was the leader from one trip to another. This could hardly be described as pure luck, and the facts had to be faced. Dislike of him was also a fact, but sympathies and antipathies come and go. And if Silin remained true to himself all the way, he would also say that any bumbler could do one run, or two, but day after day you can't get away with it. There was something that needed learning from Borodulin.

"Ask him to come and see me just the same," said Basov to Silin.

When Borodulin, shaken by Basov's invitation, came to the office in not quite as expansive mood as on the winter road, Basov asked him a few questions about the route and then said:

"There's an opinion, Alexei, that you should be appointed head of the route. What would you say to that?"

Borodulin was not expecting such an offer after his sharp and edgy conversation with Silin. But he understood that, whether it was to be him or not, the travelling community on the route had become so big that it needed single head. And he could do it, it wasn't too difficult; but was it worth it? He mentally noted how to get out of it as quickly as possible but they were trying to promote him. Mightn't he regret it afterwards.

Aware that Borodulin had begun hesitating, Basov jokingly cheered him up:

"The rumour's going round Barakhsan that Borodulin is lucky; with Borodulin you'll be all right... Heard it?"

"If you've got your head screwed on, you won't come to grief even without Borodulin," replied Borodulin in a voice muffled with excitement. He took Basov's praise for bait, but did not know how best, without offence to both, to get out of this conversation. If he refused, Basov would take

offence for certain, and he didn't want to lose the respect of such a man.

"It's hard work," repeated Basov.

"Especially for me," agreed Borodulin, rubbing his temples and neck with the palm of his hand, something he did very seldom. He did not often have to think so quickly about so much.

"And worth it... You've made a good start with the winter road. No wonder people apply for your convoy..."

"But I'd give it up right now with real pleasure," confessed Borodulin, "It's not my line! And you need a chief for the road. If not me, then someone else. You've made the right decision..."

"Why not you?" asked Basov.

"An interesting point," Alexei waved his hand. "I haven't the background for it."

"See for yourself," said Basov in a more friendly tone, no longer arguing or trying to dissuade Borodulin. "It'll be hard for you now." He grinned. "You're turning down fame..."

He wanted to add that fame revenges itself on people who reject it, but this would have been an affection, and Borodulin himself, one jump ahead, interrupted:

"Fame won't knit you a pair of socks."

"It will, and spare ones too," thought Basov, but said aloud:

"Are you leaving the convoy?"

"Yes, if you'll let me..."

"You've deserved the right. I have to meet you halfway," said Nikita drily, standing up and putting out his hand. "Hand over the convoy to Gittaulin."

"I wanted to take him with me."

"When they've finished, not before..."

For some time after seeing Borodulin out, Basov could not shake off the feeling that he hadn't yet done everything possible to make the man change his mind.

At that time, making the winter road, Borodulin's unexpected rise, like Ivanetsky's downfall, like, to a considerable extent, Basov's hesitation or determination and feeling of confidence without which it is impossible to put people at risk—all this was being tested out precisely at that time and during these days, and it had a vital meaning and significance to define which in its entirety would hardly be possible before the end of the closing operation...

VI

Vasily Korostylev, who was on duty that night in the operational headquarters, did not like the way Gatilin behaved in front of the men while inspecting the platform. Once they had failed to please him, and he had snapped at them... A pity! Korostylev had in general a good opinion of him, and not because Gatilin intended to make him his deputy. Korostylev was used to respecting people who were strong, had character and could control themselves in front of others under all circumstances—and Gatilin could do just that. But, descending on them at the river site in the night, he had snarled, had forgotten to greet Korostylev, to say nothing of the others, and had glared venomously at everybody, and especially at the chief mechanic, who had contradicted him (Silin had been right to say that they should not burn the searchlights and disturb people unnecessarily). Gatilin's attitude had baffled and upset Korostylev. "Really," he thought offendedly, "it doesn't take much to upset people."

It was late, the people strolling along the Aniva since the afternoon had rapidly dispersed as soon as the searchlights had gone out, and Korostylev, left alone in headquarters, regretted that it had all worked out so awkwardly. He did not doubt that Silin was feeling uneasy for Gatilin; it was not so

much Gatilin's nastiness that had caused offence as his arrogance. To work with people means respecting people, and not just at meetings, but everywhere and always—that's the way it should be!

After entering Gatilin's orders in the log-book, Korostylev sighed as he moved from the table to the warm stove. He threw on a few more logs. The insatiable stove consumed lots of firewood, and glory be to the boys who had laid by a sufficient quantity for the river-closing operation. There were also some coal briquettes under the porch of the little van, but the frost-hardened fir and pine branches, congealed into a stiff roll that the axe could not cut, gave more heat when they blazed up. The embers exploded in the stove with a noise like shrapnel, frightening in its unfamiliarity but giving joy as man has been delighted by tamed fire since times of old.

Korostylev did not feel lonely near the fire. Looking at the dancing tongues of flame, sitting relaxed and mellowed by the warmth, he remembered the day when his comrades gave him the job of driving the commemorative stake into the permafrost of the Aniva Arctic site. It had been an ordinary steel spike with an enamelled plate, by now cracked by the frost, on which was inscribed:

"The Aniva Hydroelectric Station will be built here."

When they had only just arrived by air, a naive Viktor Snegirev had plunged his head into the virgin snow and had chanted ecstatically: "We're not stokers, we're not carpenters ... we're an Arctic advance team!.." No anthem came of his song, but—"advance team"—stuck.

They couldn't wait to build and couldn't wait to begin!

Cases, bales, barrels of petrol and tents were hastily thrown out of the helicopters. The team

quickly said goodbye to the helicopter crews and when, whipping up the snow under them, the heavy, roaring machines receded westwards, nineteen men destined for fame shook one another's hands.

Underfoot was the harsh and unknown land of which they had been dreaming in Moscow and which they could now trample with their feet... But there were no whoops of joy to be heard. Was that thoughtfulness or distraction on their faces? Perhaps both...

They listened alertly to the silence that reached from horizon to horizon. Snows, blue-grey, like rice-paper, and no sign of life. Strange that none of them had heard then, in the first minute, what a din the Aniva was making at the Big Rapids, although they looked for a long time at their weathered, earth-coloured cliffs. For them, perhaps, the roar of the Aniva, was still blending with the noise of the helicopters as they receded into the low clouds.

Basov, the head of the expedition, who began to be called the chief of the right bank after the landing, signalled to Snegirev, and he, as chief quartermaster, produced bottles of champagne.

"What are we celebrating?" asked Anya Odarchenko.

"The Hydroelectric Station," answered someone, "the Aniva and Academician Malyshev!"

After meeting him in Moscow, they had remembered Malyshev on every suitable occasion, involuntarily, perhaps, betraying their sympathy for the old man; but Korostylev, either out of a spirit of contradiction or for some other reason, stirred the snow with the toe of his boot and barked angrily:

"To our bones not being buried here."

"Correct," said Nikita. "To friendship! Finally, to our always being able to command respect."

Had Gatilin been with them at the time,

Korostylev would now have reminded him of that toast.

...Someone's footsteps outside the window crunched over the fresh gravel not yet tamped down near the van and Korostylev pricked up his ears. Chief mechanic Silin came into headquarters, after stamping his feet on the threshold.

"Let's go outside! If I tell you what's happening there, you won't believe me anyway. Let's go!" Without giving Korostylev time to hesitate, he threw him his sheepskin from the coat-rack.

It no longer seemed like night; the lights of Barakhsan in the scattered huts on the hillside were hardly brighter than the paling stars, but even from those lights it was possible to judge that morning had come: some were preparing for the festival, some were getting ready for the shift, although not many would be directly engaged in the operation—about two hundred in all.

With the heavy gait of a man who has been up all night, Silin was walking to the throat of the closure channel. Shivering in the cold, Korostylev hurried after him. They stopped on the cliff edge—a greyish vapour was trailing over the river and the waves were lapping the rocky bank with their familiar plashing sound, but at times there seemed to be strange, unfamiliar rustlings, like the crackle of leaves underfoot, and these put Korostylev on the alert. Although he could not see anything, he had guessed where the noise was coming from but was unable to believe the evidence of his ears. He felt his eyes growing accustomed to the dark and his skin crawled. No, he hadn't imagined it; ice was moving down the Aniva...

He could only say "Silin!" It was like a whimper. He evidently wanted to swear, but waved his hand and ran, his boots slipping over the slippery stones, to the bridge where the

water-level gauge stood under a searchlight.

The slush ice had crept up unexpectedly.

Usually, after the first frosts that crystallised the ice in the pools and backwaters, the Aniva was a boiling mass of chilled water for the whole of the next week and sometimes for a fortnight. Such days, when autumn was turning into winter, alternated with thaws; the wind would rise and break the icy crust. Only the heavy ice settled during that period, even when there was no wind. It broke up along the shallow brooks and streams—water level in the Arctic is at its lowest in autumn. It does not last long, however, and the slush ice goes down after the retreating high water. In Barakhsan, they expected it no earlier than in a week's time, and by then the blocking operation was to close the Aniva and the excess water would go into the discharge tunnel.

Basov had strictly warned the men on duty that, in the event of a fall in the water-level, they were to sound the siren immediately, light up the two platforms and to begin the operation without waiting for any of the management. They were to act according to plan and without delay! Roused by the alarm, the work team would go into action literally in a minute's time. The duty tip-up lorries were taken to the starting line in the evening. If the siren sounded, then, loaded with lumps of granite and concrete, they would race to the closure channel. By that time, the roar of engines would have woken the settlement. Without decelerating, the lorries would rush to the van and, turning round on the platform, would tip up and dump their load of long-awaited hopes into the river. Only then, when the uproar had died down, would they say who had failed to carry out instructions.

When he ran to the bridge, Korostylev saw the gauge still in its place. He breathed a sigh of relief. The blue divisions on it were blurred into a

single band until he had wiped his eyes. Even then he could not tell immediately whether the water was rising or falling. He was prevented from seeing by an ice-floe touching the gauge like a horse rubbing its nose on a tethering-post. Korostylev kicked it irritably out of the way and narrowly missed falling into the water. As if he had time to think about that! He squatted down, looked, and couldn't believe his eyes. It had gone down five centimetres. That meant that Silin had pulled his leg, bless him.

Not knowing whether he was delighted or disappointed, he sat down on the wet boulders and pulled at his cigarette. He heard Silin's footsteps close by. Korostylev pulled his head down between his shoulders. They were silent, two fools in a temper with each other.

Someone hailed them from the bridge, but they could not hear the words and did not answer. Up there, they probably thought that the noise of the Rapids was the cause.

"But the big chunks are actually from Upper Lake," said Silin calmly. "The water's subsided. If it was rising, there'd be such a turmoil here, it wouldn't get through!"

"Sorry, Silin," confessed Korostylev, "I thought you were raving mad... It was me!"

"You're a fool, Vasya, even if you are an expert. You could have rung the met station," reasoned Silin. "They're a bit more reliable than we are; they'd have said ages ago if there was anything wrong, but you jumped to conclusions... Let's go back!"

Korostylev stood up.

"Do we really need to tell Basov? A pity to wake him."

"You've missed a boat! Write it in the log. But look, he's going back from the bridge, so you won't even manage that in time! If there was something wrong, they'd tell him first! You can bet your

boots his wife's not been getting any sleep!"

Basov was going away along the illuminated span of the bridge. His black cape fluttered behind him. Because of it and the broad-brimmed hat, it was impossible to mistake him for anyone else. Goodness knows how long he had been there... He was making for the left bank, which meant that all was quiet on the right one. The dense pre-morning twilight and mist hid him; only the skirts of his cape flashed spectrally and vanished. There was something unusual and disturbing about his pensive gait and solitude on the deserted nocturnal bridge.

"Shout to him?"

"Why?" snapped Silin. "Childish! Let the man be alone for a while."

Without saying anything, Silin took Korostylev under the arm and drew him towards the van.

Morning was near.

Because of the sudden onset of the slush ice, the water in the Aniva was slowly subsiding. With everyone looking at the river, it was impossible to decide if the beginning of the blocking operation was coincident with the intended time—nine o'clock in the morning local time—and less and less time was left until the deadline. Silin's initially good mood was gradually fading. Pleased at having fooled Korostylev and having made him rush down to the bank before the slush ice, he was himself beginning to feel a creeping sense of alarm. Dismissing his uneasy thoughts, he tried to convince himself: "You're worrying about nothing, you damn fool! All's as it should be for the time being, everything's normal, everything's fine..."

...The lorries and, indeed, the whole of Silin's fleet, had been moved out beyond the settlement's limits at the very beginning of the project and

were stationed behind the sparsely wooded hills. The gravel and asphalt road, along which Silin was walking, ran from the damsite to the north slope of Fraternity Hill first and then led to a fork: one branch went steeply uphill towards the centre of Barakhsan, the other ran along the foot of the hills to his own domain. This branch forked yet again—to the concrete works and to the stone quarry. Tomorrow it would be hot in them because of the tip-up lorries. In good time, without waiting for a management decision, Silin had given orders for the road to be resurfaced. He knew that the lorries needed a road as smooth as glass. Consequently, he had carried out major repairs: he had ripped up the road with a grader, put down a new surface, filled the slopes and turns with bitumen and crumbs and had put heavy rollers to flatten the surface. He expected no thanks for this from anyone, but he did not expect that there would be a row when Gatilin demanded that the management building courtyard should be surfaced with asphalt. Gatilin wanted to show off —the helicopters would land there so that the guests could be escorted over a carpet from the gangway to his office door, and Silin had indeed said: "It should have been done earlier, Viktor Sergeyevich... Now, until I've laid the tarmac on the roads, I won't let you have the rollers!" He imagined that when the zero hour began, all would start yelling as one: "Come on, get a move on!" But you can't get up speed on a rutted road, dear comrade... One could, of course, say to hell with it and rely on the drivers' conscience, on their psychology; but it was better not to: the lads' nerves were already stretched to the limit, since it was just before the river-closing operation.

The story didn't get to Basov's ears, thank goodness, but Alimushkin gave them each a lecture: one to Gavrila for shouting, and one to Gatilin for misunderstanding... None of this eye-

for-an-eye business! But Silin had done the road to a "t".

The high-ups and guests from the ministry were expected to attend the blocking operation, and had Silin been in the place of the management chief he would also have tried not to come a cropper; but for Gatilin it was a very prestigious affair... He had not been the first to come to the Aniva, everything had already been half-done, but he was all over the place in no time, organising things his own way! And at this very point, Basov and all who had been working with him had suggested a new method of blocking the river. They had to send it to Moscow for confirmation, but Gatilin had his own opinion. No one ever reproached him for it, but he took offence: whose construction project was it anyway? And he even kept on agreeing: it was a daring project! It was daring all right when it was without precedent and the gain could be millions. Gatilin, however, did not risk underwriting the scheme. They sent it off all right, but with his own report to the effect that they had no reliable long-term observations about the maximum and minimum water levels in the Aniva, and if the run-off proved higher than the norm allowed for by Basov, the river-closing operation and the final date for commissioning the hydroelectric station might be postponed. In short, he opposed it.

Moscow said nothing for a long time. Malyshev was backing it there, however, so they approved and confirmed it. Since then, Gatilin had started digging his heels in, so to speak. Perhaps it was not out of ill-feeling or malicious intent, but he seemed to be following the maxim that God looks after the careful one, and so he kept hugging the verge of the road, as Silin was now doing, to his own amusement.

In spite of the early hour, the road usually deserted at that time, was noisy with ringing

voices. "That's the youngsters making the racket! Stamping about like elephants in Asia..." Silin laughed at the obvious clumsiness of the simile. He paused and listened. From the direction of Barakhsan there came hubbub, shrieks, the languid cries of girls being furtively squeezed by daring and reckless youths not afraid of risking a slap in the face in the pitch darkness; and all this was accompanied by the tramp of feet and the crackling of branches, as if an avalanche was coming down the mountain and the road wasn't wide enough... Silin moved out of the way just in time. A gang of about ten or twelve youths swept past, all concrete-layers from the project's famous Mamayev team, and with them were the girls concrete-layers from Nadezhda Kapustina's team... However, the girls had beaten the Mamayevites for the river-blocking operation, and even on this festive occasion, the boys couldn't reconcile themselves to the idea.

"You wouldn't have beaten us if we hadn't slipped up..." Silin could hear the belated justification of the team-leader's friend, Kolya Sokolyonok, probably the most squeaky-voiced youth in Barakhsan.

In reply came a condescending (and adult) jeer from Nadezhda, which was taken up by her friends, and was followed by the comment:

"Well, yes! You stepped down for us, like real knights in shining armour... That's how we took it! Ha-ha-ha!.. Hear that, girls!"

The other girls laughed too.

But Kolya, bless him, wasn't in the least put out.

"Go on, laugh! We're even glad, but we thought you wouldn't understand, you wouldn't appreciate..."

They should show respect for one another, but what's your secret, dear Nadezhda Grigorievna? How were you able, at the head of the weaker

sex, to put our noses out of joint? And so forth. But the men had no pride. They could at least explain the situation by saying that there were supposedly no lorries to carry the mix, but instead they...

And, in disapproval of the Mamayevites and of Sokolyonok, with whom he had only just been so pleased, Silin sighed, grumbling in his senile way:

"Petticoat rule already! Those girls are already teaching out there, where you could never manage without a real man—on concrete! A fine business!.."

...One group flew past in a rush like doves startled by a piercing whistle, and there was another party on their heels. The girls decorators were twittering about something of their own. After them, Gavrila Panteleimonovich stopped thinking of silence—the entire populace was on the way. He recognised most of them by their voices, seldom did he meet anyone who did not know the project's chief mechanic, a plain man but not without guile, and so there was no end to the salutations and greetings. The shot-firers and drillers went by, clearly the most staid, they wouldn't act the fool, but they had music playing too. Where did they pick up the craze? They would festoon themselves with glittering boxes—tape recorders or transistor radios—and blast one another with them... There was no getting away from their music on a day off (don't ever poke your nose into Lomonosov Avenue, you'll be deafened by all the pop music) and now they'd occupied the motor road in the same way. Why, they would even block the Aniva with their music. They were like a tribe of gypsies!

Although the old man grumbled, however, he was not angry. The people were happy and cheerful, not because of merrymaking or drink, but because of the holiday feeling earned by hard work. Life ahead was clear for them, and they

would always be proud of the river-closing and the dam, and the town they had built on the permafrost.

The old mechanic was not seduced by the thought that perhaps his name too would go down on the rolls of history. Understandably, it was a great honour; but fancy acknowledging yourself to be the best! No one with a conscience would dare to go so far!... History itself would weed out which names were to be in big letters, and which should be in small... He was happy for the young ones. With old age approaching, when your hair was shining white, fame was not so warming to the heart as that frosty Arctic morning on a busy September day with the people shouting themselves hoarse, and with the roar and sooty fumes of the dump trucks...

It was getting much lighter; the starry blackness of night was turning pale. A dry, blustery wind was blowing up, tearing the air apart and dragging the clouds across the sky, and the prematurely black, wrinkled, frost-bitten leaves rattled in the wayside bushes. Whipped up at the verge of the road, the sand was crawling across it in serpentine coils, and it seemed as if the jazz music from the transistor radios was being woven into it like ribbons into braided hair. Here and there the sand whirled round and rose in a column—you had to step round it if you didn't want it stinging your eyes. And the people kept on coming, waves of them rolling up from Barakhsan. Wherever they were feeling particularly lively, they would strike up a song, beating a tattoo with their hot heels on the asphalt, recognising Silin and inviting him to join their company.

Smiling, he hastened to meet the stream of people. They greeted him, some respectfully, cheerfully, briskly, timidly, with constraint, others with a wisecrack, others politely, even the strangers who had not been on the project long, but

picking up the tone of general respect, each was glad to wish the chief mechanic health, a good morning, a good day.

The people were all dressed up and cracking jokes, but he was now answering them less frequently as he walked along. It was also clear from their jokes that only the road workers, with a hint at familiar circumstances, could ask him:

"Well, Gavrila Parteleimonovich, collecting holes and counting ruts?"

"Oh, yes, what's wrong with that!" he replied cheerfully, and they understood him; you won't catch a sparrow out on chaff.

"All the best!"

"All the best!"

They recognised him from a distance by his heavy, impressive figure, his slow upward climb, his squeaking boots with the hobnails striking out the sparks and the fur cap pulled down low over his forehead. Gravely raising his hat, he would answer with calm dignity, nod, smile and continue on his way.

"It's never Gavrila Panteleimonovich!" He was stopped by a familiar voice. "Good morning, Comrade Chief. Are you back from the river site already? Have you blocked the river on the quiet and are now dispersing home?"

"Yes, with my pants," Silin retorted, but he stopped, recognising Alexei Dryl.

Silin had not expected to meet him, stay-at-home that he was; but he was with his wife too. Klavdia's mouth, as always, was full of sunflower seeds. Dryl was wearing an expensive new garment for the occasion, a leather raglan, and although he was ugly himself, his rosy cheeks could easily have earned him a place on a magazine cover. A pity his nose was squashed. As they say, a squashed nose never says no to a drink. But Klavdia was looking fine. Silin raised his hat. Greetings to you too, women workers!

Her white fringed and flowered shawl shimmered on her shoulders like silk over a black velvet and no longer fashionable jacket...

"Well, Klavdia," smiled the chief mechanic. "Just out of the mothballs? Or is it the first time you've put it on since you got married?"

"It's still useful and very warm," she said, not in the least offended.

"I warned you," reproached Dryl with a husbandly frown. "Going out with you means getting laughed at in public."

"You didn't have to come!.." laughed Klavdia challengingly. "I'll go with Gavrila Panteleimonovich... Are you going to the lorries, Gavrila Panteleimonovich, or to the mechanised sector?" And she sidled up to Silin.

"Off you go, Klavdia... To the Aniva! But don't flirt in front of your husband, or you could have a rough time."

"As if I care about your Aniva," she said, offended. "I could block it with my petticoat. If I had a mind to!"

"You see?" Dryl asked Silin delightedly. "Oh, women!.. You won't stop her now she's got going. She's off!.."

Her hips swinging, Klavdia moved off abruptly like a tractor, but after three paces she put on her brakes, listening intently.

"You've got a tough woman there," agreed Silin, "just you watch her, don't let her get out of your hands—they have wide skirts, you know..."

"Never mind! We've got the Aniva to block, and then I'll give her what for. If she starts fooling about..."

"Oh, you're too aggressive!.. Change gear! Even a machine wants to be treated gently, but you..." Silin gestured glumly with his hand.

"I'm only joking," grinned Dryl in embarrassment.

"How are things in the settlement and with the

lorries? Have you heard?" asked Silin, changing to the problem that was worrying him.

"Nothing special!" said Dryl, affecting surprise, glancing at Klavdia and hastening to shake Silin's outstretched hand.

"Maybe so," thought Gavrila Panteleimonovich, "or he's afraid to say so if they're getting out of hand. But no, if there anything was wrong, Dryl wouldn't keep mum about it, he'd at least drop a hint. He is that kind of man."

Silin well remembered an incident after which he had begun to feel a special respect for Dryl. It was in winter, when Borodulin's column, after it had covered the winter road, reached the Aniva and Vitya Snegirev came back to Barakhsan from the convoy. While he was assembling the new detachment, Basov urged Korostylev and Silin to hurry up with the bridge over the Sigovyi. Without that bridge, the winter road was virtually incomplete. Looking at the precipitous slopes at Sigovyi Stream and at the thin ice, Korostylev cudgelled his brains over where to get the metal for the girders, since Basov flatly refused to release any of his reserves. Silin had some good box girders, but he was keeping them for his own purposes—they were intending to put up a big bridge instead of the suspension bridge over the Aniva in spring. So in reply to Vasya's appeals, he said:

"Basov can authorise it and he can sign the chit, but I'm still not letting my beams go!"

What was he to do? There were only three days left before inspection day, but all Vasya had done, apart from the drawings, was to clear the banks. What use were three days? It would take several teams, let alone one, more than a week just to put up the welded framework and concrete the bases for the piers. Korostylev went to Silin again.

"Why are you so scared for your beams?" he tried talking Silin round. "Afraid we'll cut them up? We'll extend them with angle irons, we'll weld

them again, and they'll be as good as new!"

"You're not on the ball, Vasya," sighed Silin. "Why did Basov advise you to put Dryl's team on the bridge?"

"For no good reason at all!" objected Vasya. "Dryl's a business-like fellow, but he won't cope with iron. His tool is the axe..."

"But he'll come out on top," protested Silin. "He got a head and hands as well as an axe... You could ask him a few questions about what to do. And time's running out, friend."

At this juncture, Dryl and his team arrived at the appointed place. Basov had apparently said that they wouldn't cope without him.

In spite of the cold, Dryl was going about in a thin cardigan belted round the waist. He had tucked a hatchet behind the belt. He was neither tall nor small, slapping himself on the sides with his leather gloves and sizing up Sigovyi Stream. Dryl wore his fur hat high on the crown of his head with one flap turned up, and he had a gnawed pencil-stub behind his ear. He scrawled something with the pencil-stub on a piece of paper, shook the snow off his felt boots and did not even glance at Silin and Korostylev, who were standing on one side. As if they weren't there and he couldn't hear them arguing. He chatted to his own men, then went up to the other two.

"Well, Vasily Ivanovich and Gavrila Panteleimonovich, I invite you into the van for a drop of hot water!.. I've got to fill in a chit for materials and decide what to bring. But I'm worried your tongues might stick to your teeth."

"Why?" asked Silin.

"You're arguing a hell of a lot... In general, you're making the air shake, and it's frozen, you know..." He laughed.

"You're too smart, Dryl," said Korostylev offendedly; but he got over it in the warm van and wasn't angry any more.

"Are you thinking of building on piles?" said Silin to Dryl. "I'm short of metal," he warned.

"Have you got any props? I notice you've got some stacks behind the stores. Send a lorry, and that'll be enough for me."

Dryl asked for very little metal, mainly for clamps to join the beams. When he heard this, Korostylev could not help laughing. But Silin was thinking. It was obvious why Korostylev was laughing. No bridge built with props could take the strain. There were going to be loaded lorries and bulldozers, and they might even have to send an excavator across. Even Dryl should realise that he wasn't building a bridge to take a horse and carriage. So what was he going to do?

"I only need these sticks," said Dryl, "for the casing. It's not going to be a timber bridge."

"Aha! so you're going to slap it together out of ferroconcrete..." quipped Korostylev mirthlessly. "I've no objections. But he"—and he nodded at Silin—"doesn't issue box girders. And he won't issue them, either."

At the words "won't", Vasily Ivanovich noticeably raised his voice, wanting to jolt Silin and Dryl out of their, in his opinion, blissfully irresponsible mood. As if not understanding this, Dryl said candidly:

"Iron's precious, why ruin it? We'll make an ice bridge—dirt cheap and very tough."

Unable to go on being annoyed with them, since they had certainly come to terms, Korostylev scratched the back of his head. Dryl had set him a real poser! It all seemed so simple: drive in some timber wedges, fill the casing with water, and the bridge would be ready...

Aware of Korostylev's difficulty and without disturbing his thoughts, Silin winked at Dryl, as if to say, "How did we manage that?" He laughed and said quietly:

"You'll have to get a job in a savings bank, Dryl."

"Why?" asked the other, suspecting a catch in it.

"Their posters always say: Reliable, Profitable, Convenient..."

"You just check!" intervened Korostylev. "Supposing we fill the casing with water and grow some ice... Fine! But where's your durability guarantee?"

"Ice is strong! What more of a guarantee d'you want?" Dryl threw his hands apart in bewilderment. "Ice a quarter of a metre thick can easily carry a horse and sleigh. With half a metre of ice, I remember, we had one-and-a-half tonners crossing the river as if it was asphalt. You really think a metre won't be enough for a MAZ lorry?"

"It's all right for you, but I've got to risk my neck." And Korostylev sighed eloquently.

"How so, Vasily Ivanovich?" Dryl flushed offendedly because of the insult, and because he had to protest to his chief, whom he respected, and very much so. "You're not really involved in this," he said, "but I answer for what I do."

After making a hasty estimate of the durability of an ice bridge, Korostylev finally agreed with Dryl, and also with Silin, who muttered in his ear while Korostylev was making an estimate:

"I don't need your arithmetic to tell me that a metre of ice'll support a tank, not to mention..."

Basov came to inspect and approve the completed bridge.

Although it was winter, it was a bright, calm day. The troubled Sigovyi Stream was exhaling wreaths of frosty steam. The rime had settled in blue-grey bands in the folds of the men's sheepskin coats and on their shoulders, and was tinting their beards and eyebrows white. There were no cracks in the massive piles that were like marble columns, and the thin, matchstick-like framework

of the supports was not showing through the thickness of the ice—you wouldn't have guessed they were there if you hadn't known. The monolithic span of ice seemed to have grown into the river banks during the last century.

"Let's get cracking!" said Silin and he raised his hands. At this signal, the excavator driver half rose behind the heavy controls of his machine. Then, as if entrusting itself to the smooth movements of Silin's palms, the unwieldy machine obeyed the chief mechanic's bidding. Keeping his distance and backing off step by step, Silin waved the excavator on towards him, but he and the bystanders were closely watching the excavator tracks, which were crumbling the ice slightly. The crust could be heard cracking. The driver, working in the cold with his cabin door open, broke into a sweat with the strain, but the bridge was holding. No one, however, followed after the machine until Silin held his hands crosswise in the air. With trembling fingers, he took a cigarette out of a crumpled packet, got a light from one of the carpenters and went back, kicking aside the fine crumbled ice with the toe of his boot. Basov came up to him, laughing and shaking his head.

"Clever lads!" he said. "Well done! But where's Dryl?" and Basov looked round for him.

"What?" croaked a voice from somewhere below. "Just a mo'..."

His hat thickly powdered with rime, pale and distraught, but with a contented smile on his face, Dryl climbed awkwardly out from under the bridge. One of the men quickly reached down his hand to pull him up.

Basov's face darkened. Anxious to anticipate his question, Dryl fibbed openly, realising too late that he should have kept his mouth shut.

"I ... just one thing... Aha! But it's hellish cold!" He didn't notice how colourfully he had been swearing.

"Who gave you permission? What were you doing down there?" Basov had lost all self-restraint and was shouting at Dryl. He was shouting for the first time, but no one was surprised at this. "Decided to get under the bridge, did you? Get out of there at once! From work, from Barakhsan, go wherever you want..."

"But I..."

"What d'you mean 'I'? Fed up with life, are you?"

"He was looking for a guarantee down there!" shouted someone.

"What guarantee? Have you gone out of your mind or something?" said Nikita shrilly.

"Well, someone lost..." one of the carpenters grinned, and the others supported him with ragged laughter.

"Dryl?" asked Basov grimly, but more calmly this time.

The other looked away.

"I..." he said, shifting from one foot to the other. "Well, if anything had gone wrong, then there wouldn't be anyone to blame..."

At this point, Korostylev shouldered the responsibility and Silin helped him—in general, they both carried the can.

...While he was engrossed in his thoughts, the road seemed shorter to Silin, and easier too, although it was uphill. For about an hour now, he had been making his way from the Rapids to the garage of his lorry fleet. It was cool. After the recent, diminishing warmth of autumn, the snap frosts had gripped not only the ground but the sky too, and in the freezing heights the stars were turning cold—it wasn't easy to tell which were near and which were far away. It was hard to see ahead, that's why dawn was coming so slowly, as if human patience itself was being tried in that battle between the darkness and the light.

The road led up a series of slopes; they were

not steep, but they told ageing legs. It was particularly hard going after the fork; the people were making a noise on one side, and to go alone meant thinking... Silin paused for a moment, peering up at the humpbacked top of the hill round the foot of which he was walking. Covered with scraggy little trees, it stood out spikily against the dark background, weakly illumined by the lights of Barakhsan. It was quiet here, there were no annoying transistor radios; even the roar of the waterfall was muffled, although the wind was coming from the south.

Silin went over to the verge of the road and sat down on a pipe covered with glass wool and roofing felt: it was the hot-water mains that ran to the garages and the repair station from the left bank. It was a common practice in the North for the pipes to be laid on the surface. Not very beautiful, perhaps, but this was the tundra! In spring and summer, when the lorries started out over the mosses and grasses, you couldn't walk, let alone drive; after a few runs over the track, it would turn suddenly into a marsh. It was the same wherever you dug up the turf. The roots were as fine as goosedown. If a wheel went over, the surface would come off in patches—it was a painful sight to see.

He remembered way back when they were laying the first hot-water mains. Vantulyaku, lord of the tundra, arrived. He took a look at the way the lads were sloshing their boots about in the trench and said that they shouldn't dig; the tundra didn't like being wounded. It was a sin to dig—if you walked over dug ground, it would swallow you up... They didn't believe him, but they were finally convinced. They let the pipeline down a metre—suddenly, water began running. They tried to find a break or a crack, but they couldn't even find the pipe. That was Nganasani for you. And he was laughing, the Arctic devil. "Barakhsan!" as he

smoked his pipe, "barakhsan!.." Even that little detail had to be learned by experience. And the roads? The agony they cost him! Hundreds of cubic metres of gravel, all thrown under-foot into the bog. If you brought them up to the surface, they wouldn't be roads, they'd be more like fortress walls.

He was at the top. It wasn't far to the garage.

The lights in the office windows glimmered through the sparse scrub. What were his duty men doing there?

Slightly agitated, Silin took a cigarette out of Korostylev's packet as he walked along and lit up, cupping the flame in his hand as usual. He still had to go round the Devil's Finger—truly a "finger" that stuck up like a column from the ground, a stark basalt column several metres in diameter. From there, it was only about four or five hundred paces to the garage gates. Those gates were never locked; only at night was a rattling chain hung on hooks. It was not really necessary either, but for the drivers a garage wasn't a garage without one; it was a habit they'd brought from the mainland.

A muffled, mounting roar round the corner put him on the alert. The splashing headlamps of a lorry swept across his face. He dived wildly off the road, imagining that he was too late; but the huge dump-truck shot past him with a belch. The wind blew the cigarette out of his teeth, and it whirled round in the receding eddies, scattering sparks for a long time before going out.

"What's the meaning of this?" wondered the chief mechanic. "What's got into him? Where's he off to?"

The lorry was piled high with the slabs intended for the damming operation, and as soon as he spotted this, he realised that the first loaded dump trucks on the line had begun to move off. So it had started... Why were the others taking so long?

What were they waiting for, the slobs?

Silin was hardly aware of running to the garage, and only near the gates did he have a violent attack of breathlessness; his legs turned to cotton wool and, staggering, he just made it and clutched at the grille to stop himself falling and recover his breath. There was an incredible uproar going on round the lorries in the yard. He heard the drivers swearing irritably and nastily, and the piercing, femininely shrill cries of the duty mechanic. He could not go up to them, his heart was holding him back, and he couldn't understand what was happening.

"I said stay there and stop rushing about!" shouted Perchatkin, waving his hands and chasing the drivers away from the lorries.

"Who drove off?.." wondered Silin. He finally mastered himself and, stepping warily, almost feeling his way, emerged from the dark into the illuminated circle under the lamp near the office and asked abruptly and in a hollow voice:

"What's happened?, Who cleared off?"

At this point, conscious of the steadiness returning to his legs, he went straight into the office. The drivers crowded after him, talking excitedly.

"Someone took a lorry out..." reported Perchatkin, his voice breaking. "Only just now..."

"Who? Why?"

The table top was littered with the black oblongs of dominoes, and right at the edge was a greenish, sloping-sided unopened bottle of alcohol. On the chest opposite stood tumblers stained yellow by tea. "So they hadn't been drinking," he noted, but said aloud reproachfully:

"Drinking?"

"Honestly, Gavrila Panteleimonovich! It was only Borodulin. Just popped in, he said, to wish you all the best. He pulled out the bottle, but we refused. Then he suddenly said: 'Think I won't

dam the Aniva?' We gave him a piece of our mind. Go home!.. But he beat us to it, slammed the door in our faces and a moment later—rrr-rrr-rrr! We ran out and—no lorry!"

"He pinched our biggest rock!" added someone else.

"What biggest rock?"

"The one with 'Stuff yourself, Aniva!' on it," replied the same malignant or perhaps angry voice, and Silin, who was thinking about the vanished lorry and trying to work out what was at the back of Borodulin's mind and what this was leading to, automatically noted that he did not recognise the speaker, but there was no time to question him.

"Not 'stuff yourself' but 'submit', you fool," corrected Perchatkin and added guiltily, for Silin's benefit: "They wanted to go after him, but I wouldn't allow it. It'd have been a disaster!"

"True," noted the chief mechanic with complete indifference, although he wanted to say something else. A road chase, however, would indeed have meant disaster. You couldn't get near the Aniva now, everybody was on the bridge... And Borodulin would make for it so that they could all see him—and symphony in the back: "Submit, Aniva!" Oh, he loved performing circus tricks, blast him! It seemed to Silin that the rock's fate was now bothering him more than Borodulin—but one was inseparable from the other... "Been too soft!" he thought, meaning Borodulin, and himself too, and his hand automatically reached out for the call-button on the switchboard. He watched the nervous winking of the green light, afraid that Korostylev might not be in the office van just then...

The loudspeaker crackled, and Korostylev's calm voice came over.

"Headquarters here, Korostylev..." and asked immediately afterwards: "Is that you, Gavrila Panteleimonovich? I've gone off duty. Odarchen-

ko's taken over; she's gone to look at the water-level... She doesn't like the slush ice." He laughed. "I think the ice is passing... How are things with you? Everything all right?"

Silin raised his hand, a sign to the drivers crowding round him that they shouldn't interrupt and, licking his dry lips, picked up the microphone.

"Vasya..." He cleared his throat. "I've got a spot of bother here, Vasya... Borodulin's cleared off with a dump truck, he's going to empty it into the river... Anyway, he's heading for the closure channel. Don't let a panic start, that's the main thing. Otherwise, that devil..."

"So-o..." said Korostylev. "What can I do? I can't hold him back by the front bumper."

"I think he'll make for the left platform so that everybody'll get a good view..."

"Could be."

"Switch on full lighting. Let them watch the fool! Perhaps he thinks he'll block the river on his own, eh?"

Korostylev laughed with relief. "All right, we'll lay on the illuminations for him."

He felt amazingly relaxed at the wheel.

The lorry was obedient, the road was smooth; if he'd run over a pebble or a hemp seed, he would probably have felt it. The headlights were piercing the darkness so far ahead that their light was dissolving as in the mist. There was no traffic on the road and if you didn't think that somewhere the road must end, with everything that tied you to Barakhsan, to that damned life, hidebound by convention just as speed on the highway is limited by the road-signs, what bliss it could be!

He glanced at the side mirror and saw no lights in pursuit. This made him smile sceptically. Cowards!

Borodulin's thoughts flowed idly. He didn't care

what he was thinking. Earlier, he had been blazing with fury, yes, fury; but now the fire had gone out and the embers were merely smouldering. Since they'd hurt his feelings, what dialogue could there be now? It was not out of blind ignorance that he had decided to make fools of them, to show how to dam the river. There could be no thought of repentance—he simply wanted to get even with them for their contempt, to put an end to it all with a farewell splash, and that would be that. Only it was a pity (it was indeed!) that the road to the closure channel was so short...

It had never entered his head that evening to go to the garage. But he was living in a drivers' hostel after all, and the cheerful activity there excited him because he was left out of it. The boys were shaving for the occasion as if for a dance, smoothing their hair and drenching one another with eau de cologne; and those who were to work the following afternoon were offering to swap for the night shift. Then they all went off somewhere; apparently they were having a discussion in the information room on how to coordinate their efforts during the operation...

Roman Gittaulin looked in on him, mumbled something about the winter road, reminded him that they had become friends there, but never mentioned that he was intending to beat Borodulin's records the following day...

Alexei smoked a cigarette on the stairs, went into the washroom to see if Chervonenko's balalaika was tinkling in there, but his tracks were cold too. Misery in the passages...

He swore, got out of his chest the unchangeable hundred ruble note he was keeping there for breeding purposes—after all, they say that money begets more money—and went to the restaurant with it. There was cigarette smoke in there, a fug and conversation, but there wasn't a table at which he could sit and order a meal. He asked

twice and was told "Taken"; but whether they really were engaged or whether people were avoiding him was something that Alexei was unable to find out. That should be settled with fists, but the atmosphere was wrong for that. "I shan't leave anyway," he decided.

The harrassed waitresses rushed about, ignoring him. Only they could take an order and he waited glumly without pestering or asking, involuntarily remembering that when they had returned from the winter road, those same women had run themselves off their feet. And now, thank God, they didn't ask him to leave...

Late that night, lurching drunkenly through Barakhsan, Alexei wandered into the children's playground and sat down on an uncomfortable bench under a wooden mushroom and, hunching his shoulders, sat dozing for about two hours. He was brought round by the cold, did not know where he was, and drifted off aimlessly past the hostel down the avenue to the foot of the hill. He turned off for the garage at the fork. It now seemed to him that he had forgiven everybody and everything; he was not offended at anyone—he was the fool!—and these thoughts made him feel better. "I'll go, I'll go to the lads," he persuaded himself at the garage gates. "We'll sit down and have an honest talk... Let them block the river, I'll just look on..."

Until he crossed the threshold, he imagined that was how it would be. But he went in, looked round, and his rehearsed speech somehow didn't get made; the words stuck in his throat. The boys were sitting there looking really smart with ties under their overalls, looking at him as if he were a dummy and saying nothing. If only one of them at least would say something, but they just waited.

"Have you done the job already? Are you keeping quiet about it?" he asked rather rudely, himself aware of a repressed jeer in his voice.

"We were just waiting for you, Borodulin," replied Tolya Chervonenko.

"Just as I thought, you couldn't do without me!" The sneer was intentional this time. "Perhaps we could down a noggin apiece..."

"Don't play the fool, my friend," warned one of the drivers Silin-fashion, shuffling the dominoes.

"I wasn't serious," drawled Borodulin. He took a bottle out of his inside pocket and slid it over the table to the centre. He had already picked at the stopper with his thumbnail. He looked into the chest and found some glasses. "Well, shall we break the pledge with a noggin apiece?" The men said nothing.

"Just let me pour out"—Borodulin had already stretched out his hand, but the red-headed Chervonenko, that puppy with principles, who had once scuttled about to his orders as cook, but now seemed to be putting on airs, was bold enough to interfere.

"What are you doing, lads? I'll serve anyone a gallon after we've blocked the river! But don't mess things up now..."

"Let him babble, he'll get over it..." thought Borodulin, and he slid the glasses up to the bottle. Glass tinkled against glass; they stood like brothers round their big sister. And, as if Chervonenko had not said anything at all, commented Borodulin with concern:

"The glasses are a bit much mucky... Oh well, the booze'll disinfect them..."

"Please..." began Chervonenko again, but the burly Fedyashin threw the dominoes down on the table and turned to him.

"Don't be scared, lad! Let Borodulin play the fool." And to Borodulin: "Come on, friend, beat it!"

"You mean," he said defiantly and with menace, "you're chucking me out?"

"Did you think we were going to fall into one

another's arms?" laughed Fedyashin and he rose to his feet, hinting that with him words were matched with deeds.

Borodulin pretended not to notice this.

"Our ancestors always washed the bottom stone first..." But he realised, without getting a reply, that he was wasting his time. "All right, perhaps we'll wash the last one."

His head down bull-fashion, he made for the door.

"Hey, wait!" said Fedyashin. "They say you're tight-fisted, but you're leaving the bottle here without rhyme or reason. How come?"

Borodulin looked at him, spat on the threshold and walked out.

The dim lamp in its rusty shade lit the doorway and the threshold, knocked together out of greasy railway sleepers and long since worn down by heavy boots. As he walked past the lamp-post, Borodulin could hear Perchatkin running after him. He stood on the threshold for a moment, the nylon of his jerkin crackling, probably watching him or wanting to say something; but he changed his mind. He saw Borodulin lurch clumsily off, not knowing where he was going, diagonally across the yard towards the column of dump-trucks. He banged his fist on a bonnet and swore.

"Come on, come on, Borodulin!" Perchatkin shouted. "Get a move on while you're still on your feet!"

Borodulin walked away.

Somewhere not far off, a wire rubbed rustily on a metal fence and there was a reek of petrol and overheated engine oil. "The dogs ought to be barking," thought Borodulin nostalgically, "same as on a kolkhoz..." The hand that had reached out to touch the bonnet sensitively felt the last warmth of cooling iron. They had warmed up the engines recently, and the thought that the machines were ready to leap into action lured him towards

success. "I wonder if the cab's open..." he thought, although he had no doubt that it was open and even knew that the ignition keys were in the locks, not in the drivers' pockets...

Putting his trembling fingers on the ribbed side of the dump-truck, he looked upwards. Through the darkness he dimly saw the white inscription on the granite: "Submit, Aniva!"

Just what he wanted!

He stood on the step and turned the cab door-handle with ease. The door didn't squeak. The ignition key was in its place. The smooth and comfortably moulded bucket seat smelt of leather. "I wonder whose lorry this is? If only it was Fedyashin's. He'd have something to dance about..." He believed in his success now, but did not put out his hand to touch the ignition key yet.

A turn of the key, a click, and he would annul all their meetings. After all, people would ask who had thrown the first stone, and willy-nilly they would have to answer... For some reason, Borodulin believed that Silin would have to answer. He could see in front of him, as in a waking dream, his taut, white skin over his cheekbones.

He still delayed, hesitating to press the starter button, as if he were regretting something. He hadn't the heart to admit that he had lost his good name for nothing. It was good to swank as number one. You walk round the town, and whoever you look at it's as if they're all in debt to you. No wonder his chest stuck out every time he thought, "I can and they can't..." And there was so much respect, and everything seemed too little, the same as with girls: give them a trunkful of ribbon, but it's still not enough. It had all started with the winter road... By accident, for he had not been seeking fame; he had tasted it involuntarily, and something had changed in him at the time. He had been so greedy when he had given up the trip; he had

thought they'd be in a jam without him, and he had waited for it to happen, and then he'd show them again... But other laws he didn't understand were operating; his lucky number didn't come up again.

How desperately he longed for what he had missed!.. But he could not get it back. He kept trying to catch the right moment and rushed to wherever the project was in turmoil: to build roads, to conrete-laying, to the quarries... And fame flaunted itself at the dyke, at the diversion tunnels, or in the sand quarries again where he had been before... The others had already noticed and had started laughing at his antics. He ought to stop and get down to work! But who in Barakhsan could be impressed by high figures? He needed to be where others found it impossible... And he got tired. He wore himself out, and he wore his team out too—they were in a bad way by the end of the shift. Once he even thought that someone was deliberately and skilfully luring him into a trap, and he had no alternative but to crash through bull-headed. Had he been lucky, he might have become famous all over the country, and before you knew where you were, the reverberations would have reached his native Gryazi... But... He recalled a sentence he had read somewhere: "An incident of local importance", and so calmly, indifferent to the possible consequences, he turned the ignition key, pressed the starter button and revved up. The cumbersome lorry rocked on its suspension and rolled reluctantly down the slight gradient to the gates. As soon as he taxied out on to the road, Borodulin sounded the horn desperately. Wake up, sleepyheads!

Sensing that the lorry was gradually accustoming itself to his touch and was not bouncing, while the twenty-five ton load in the back was not swinging it from side to side, Borodulin had a sense of relief. It was better to escape pursuit in

an obedient machine.

An oval driving mirror had been screwed over the windscreen for appearances' sake, evidently, since the high body blocked the view to the rear. Alexei rivetted his eyes on it several times, as if it was a nuisance to him. Another man was looking at him from the mirror; it was himself, of course, but the light from the instrument panel was uneven and was distorting his face. The sloping brow with the deep furrow across it and the swelling on the right cheek were well lit. The nose seemed particularly acquiline, and the eyes were veiled by a shadow. "No, I couldn't have sagged like that in a night. Yesterday," thought Alexei, remembering the evening before in the restaurant, "I looked all right..." The intent stare from the darkness of the mirror was unnerving him and he turned it away.

Without reducing speed, Borodulin rounded the "Devil's Finger" and at that point something darted out from under the wheels. From the hunched figure, he recognised Silin. Now he was certain of pursuit.

Dry branches of wild rosemary were sticking up along the verges. Scattering silver over the black stems, the light from the lorry ricochetted over them as over the boards of a fence. The engine was purring calmly, with the same soft and even note that tells the trained ear better than all the instruments that there is plenty of power in reserve—the only thing that could guarantee Borodulin the success of his venture, for all of Silin's very likely machinations. In Silin's place, he would have risked trying to stop the mad driver.

Even now Alexei wanted to show off, to give a driving lesson. The cumbersome iron creatures understood him superbly well. It was harder to come to terms with people, he believed, but it was easy with a machine: pour some petrol under its

belt, lay in a spare wheel, and go a-roving anywhere on the map. What sort of soul had machines got, blast it! He despised people fond of arguing about it. If you treat the machine nicely, it'll do the same for you... What sort of a way to talk was that? Drivel! A machine is an object. It has to be known, and that's all the soul there is to it. A chassis, engine, wheels... Screwed, twisted and welded together... A tool! If you know how, use it; if not, stand back, otherwise it'll run you over instead of you running it. You're sorry for it? But that's just ridiculous! Try and feel sorry for a woman—and she'll start being capricious and playing tricks. No, my dear, you're meant to carry five tonnes, ten, twenty-five—get under that load and heave until your back breaks. He, Alexei Borodulin, only recognised this approach. Either he got sturdy lorries, or they really did feel his heavy character, but they didn't break down. And when he took over an excavator, he drove it so hard that the ground shook, world turned round and slid away. Gittaulin would come to take over the next shift. Click-click—he had already crawled underneath to tinker about with it. "Only adjusting it," he would say... But no matter how many times Borodulin showed him, "Look, Roman, nothing's grating, whistling or sticking," Roman would take hold of the levers and everything would start screeching! Was it because of the machine? No, it depended on the man...

He felt uplifted by a sense of righteousness and a certain superiority ensuing from his reflections, the excellent road and the lack of pursuit. The wild rosemary flew along the verges like a silvery black ribbon. The fork appeared in front of him. The headlamps lit up a woman's tense figure. She was holding a white scarf to her chest with one hand while the other was stretched out towards him and she was waving. "A fine time to jump on to the road, you cow!" thought Alexei, making up

his mind to drive past her. Incomprehensibly, with or without good reason, people tend to rush under the wheels, and the driver, whether the hitch-hiker raises his hand or not, sizes up the prospective passenger at a glance, although no one knows by what signs. He himself had not made any mistakes...

The wind plucked the ends of the scarf so that they flapped behind the woman's back. She was still facing the lights with her hand stretched out in front of her. Borodulin recognised Basov's wife, Elena. He hadn't been expecting this! His doubts immediately forgotten, he braked sharply. She was, as always, going to the Met Station on the left bank. Obedient to the brakes, the enormous dump-truck pulled up. The front wheel, almost as high as a man, ripped the gravel off the verge as it dug itself into the ground near Elena's shoes. She was immediately enveloped in dust and hot air from the engine.

Only a crack driver can stop a running beast in that way, but Elena did not notice anything. She was not even surprised that Borodulin was at the wheel. He was hoping that Elena would tighten her lips, twitch her nostrils, intending to snort and say with irony, as she had once said to him when he was on the excavator:

"Alyosha, you should put on an act like that in the circus, not on the dyke."

Yes, he had performed some tricks on the dyke. They were best forgotten. But if anyone had seen how she could smile while saying it... Her lips were petulant; she was dissatisfied and angry. Yet at the same time, and not after the dissatisfied grimace, her smile was challengingly brazen. He tried to guess whether she was angry or simply pretending; at such a moment, if you miss your chance, you miss it forever...

The cabin was high up and not very roomy, as

in a private car, but Elena did not feel inconvenienced. She smiled vaguely at Borodulin.

"Has it begun already?" she asked, and he sensed a tremor in her voice coming from somewhere deep down inside.

"You must sleep less, Elena Ilyinichna! You could be late for the first stone!"

"Indeed?" she was amazed. "Why aren't any of the other lorries about?"

"Because they can't be seen," he said abruptly.

Her glance slid over him indifferently. She didn't understand anything, and it was all the same to her. She closed her eyes wearily.

"It's better that way," thought Alexei Borodulin. "You'll understand afterwards, Basov's little woman!"

Some time passed and she seemed to wake up. Borodulin noticed that her shoulder was tensed, though it had been languid and listless until then, and was touching his arm. She snapped out of it, turned sharply to him and gave him a long stare fraught with sudden surmise.

She was silent. Her breathing quickened. Her right hand on the front handle was white with tension, and the fingers of her other hand (he could not see any more, but guessed by the sound) were slowly drumming on the leather back of the seat. Then they stopped by his shoulder and, scarcely moving, she very lightly touched him with her long, manicured finger-nails.

He waited to see what would happen next. For some reason, he was certain that she had likewise remembered their encounters on the dyke—seemingly accidental and apparently with nothing reprehensible about them, and yet... If she called him "Alyosha" now, if she smiled, as she had done then... Borodulin did not feel afraid; only now, it seemed, was he beginning to understand that this woman truly disturbed him, and he was waiting for a sign... She was silent.

The blood was rising in him in a hot wave. Without taking his hands off the wheel, he tossed his hair back, intending to pull up and put Elena down for his own good, but she carefully touched his shoulder with her fingers and slid them over it, as if asking forgiveness.

"You're ... on your own..." she said, neither asking nor hazarding a guess; and, knowing that she meant the blocking operation, he nodded cautiously.

Because she answered him with silence, something happened between them, as if consent had joined them together, and it was hard to believe this, although Elena was not resisting in the cabin, was not dissuading him—it did not occur to her to stop or restrain Borodulin. Was she, perhaps, afraid of him? Shock? No, it was not the numbness inflicted on people by the unexpected. Nor was it vague distraction... Without looking at Elena, Borodulin knew that she was devouring him with her eyes, and this meant that... He could not find the right word at once, although it was not even necessary; she simply didn't want to stop the lorry just now. What need was there of words?

Elena felt terrified. And happy. But her happiness was unearthly, as if it was all happening not in reality, but in a dream, and it was happening at the bleak time of dawn when she was usually waking up with a disturbed, uneasy sensation, as if frightened by the approach of the long Arctic night.

When the first stars disappear, in that region of the sky where the first rays of dawn are reflected, the shades of night are sucked up like a black inkstain, and the earth seems to go numb with fright. At that time, if the legends are to be believed, those beggarly children of the earth, the vampires, repair to their secret refuges and abodes, the

hummocks, swamps and depths of the forest. It is they who bring people good and bad dreams, the foretokens of joy and sorrow. And it sometimes happens that one of the vampires dawdles and is too late for the third crow of the cock and, unshriven, wanders about all day, upsetting the world with its pranks.

The legends and even the recollections of them have died out in the human memory over the centuries. Only seldom, on rare days, will some soul regain the memory of the mysterious sounds that presage the calm radiance of day and the soft sunset on the shore of life as long as winter spinning, and happiness itself—sometimes simple, sometimes as intricate as a lace pattern.

At the bleak hour of dawn the cuckoo is not calling yet, but neither is the owl hooting. Everything in the heavens is on the alert. The morning wind begins to accomplish the fate of the day as it comes into its own. Now the whisperer is silent, and he who has left his reflections and cares for a moment to listen to the silence will have an intimation of success, but whoever misses it will be woken up by the cold thoughts and inclemency in a soul bereft of peace. No one, however, will dispute such foreknowledge, for at the beginning day will come, to be judged by the nature of the evening glow.

That day, in the morning, Elena had shuddered at the bang of the open window and had felt a stream of cold air from outside touch her feet, rise higher and fill the cleavage of her breast, then flow down from her neck to her shoulder. A weak air current stirred her hair, unloosed and hanging down from the pillow. The sensation of an unpleasant touch stayed on her body, or perhaps it was only her chilled and troubled state of mind.

Elena was not asleep.

She clearly heard the click of the lock on the door as Basov went out, and again a current of air

stirred her hair. It was as if a light breeze had risen somewhere in the room, had whispered and boomed outside the nocturnal window, rushing away to the environs of Barakhsan.

She had been waiting patiently for Nikita all night. He had not even glanced at her.

Elena sat on the divan with her feet tucked under her. He didn't need her... It was all so simple and understandable. And no hysterics. She was calm and unafraid. She got up and tiptoed into his study.

The ciragette ends had been emptied out of the ash-tray, the room had been aired and the desk tidied up. Basov was true to habit—everything as she had once taught him. The pencils were lying in their wooden box carved from the first larch felled in Barakhsan. The bottom had been signed as a keepsake by all the members of the advance team. And here was the shell with its nasty pearl. Also rubbish; she had not come here for that. Her eyes rested on a thick leather-bound notebook with a slide-rule on it. It was in this that Nikita used to write the necessary quotes, formulae and references, and it contained a rare set of calculations that he had compiled for every eventuality of life. Except one...

Destroy it!

Elena picked up the notebook—it was all Nikita owned, he had nothing more valuable there—and she mentally egged herself on: "It's time to sum up, to square the accounts if life hasn't worked out as I dreamed. If nothing's durable or sacred. But the borderlines of the moral and the immoral," she thought, "are decided by man himself."

It seemed to her that she had stepped up to that invisible dividing line beyond which non-being holds sway, levelling righteous and guilty alike. She was being enveloped in bottomless space as black as a raven's wing, and her own personal shade, her second self, was departing into the

blackness... Diminishing as it did so, it was receding in ever-decreasing circles into the distance, into an invisible point—the very bottom of a gigantic funnel. She had a feeling that beyond that point, space had neither time nor boundaries; terror, conscience, and everything earthly that binds and separates people had no force, no application and no meaning...

But what petty devil had got into her? About to destroy the notebook, to square accounts with Nikita, even with life, Elena was watching herself from the fringe of her consciousness and admiring too much what she saw. Compare her with Anya? What might that one be feeling? No doubt she would toss her head and laugh. "What? The other world? We're all going to ride around in Zhiguli up there!"

That was why the Barakhsan people liked her. They liked her, but not Elena. So, it turned out, the world was arranged. And it would be silly, she decided, in an attempt to justify her weakness, it would be silly to try and change all that in an hour.

The dawn was already getting ready somewhere behind the hills, but nothing could speed the coming of day. And the night became irrevocable. Only the seed, sending its root down into it, is destined to link past and future. The ear will ripen, but who can foretell what will be in it? Pastor's lettuce, rye, thistles and golden wheat all grow in the same field.

Still driving the lorry toward the river site, Borodulin racked his brains in an effort to understand why Elena should involve herself in his designs. He might break his neck, but what about her?.. Had she got it in for Silin too? It was funny. The north was vast. What had a met station to do with a dam? It was not because of her work that her status was being determined

there, but because she was Basov's wife. She had said that to him herself once...

In his memory, an unnaturally white cloud sailed up to be arrested over the Aniva and imbued with the rays of a sun that was also white in the sky before evening. The sun was not setting. It was hanging there, worn out after its long race across the high midnight sky, the sky of the North, and Borodulin, himself indifferent to nature, looked up and watched the cobwebby stuff reaching out from the cloud towards the sun and the light shimmering softly in the fabric itself.

On that day, the sun was shining over the Aniva and a splash behind him made him glance round. Ripples were spreading out on the surface of the little lagoon: evidently, a catfish had surfaced and dived. Borodulin went away with the naive prejudice that such fish could lure you into the depths. Except that it wasn't a catfish, but an iridescent trout, spluttering and ignoring him completely. Elena rapidly swam upstream. He could see the swarthy gleam of the wet shoulder and noticed a small dimple in her elbow... She rolled over on to her back and the sluggish current carried her diagonally towards the bank. A light wave rolled over her breast, the long wrists flexed smoothly in the water. "There's an amphibian for you!" he thought with awkward delight, and he didn't feel embarrassed when she stepped ashore, willowy and supple, with a red elasticated swimming costume over her broad hips.

He had already guessed that she had not come from the site but from the met station, the little tin-roofed house not far away. "Going on night shift or home?" asked Alexei sitting opposite her and lighting a cigarette.

Elena turned her head and scrutinised him for some time. He smoked calmly, waiting to see the outcome of this inspection. His big, tanned face, not yet cooled down from the fever of work on

the dam, breathed candour and self-confidence.

"Judging by your photographs, you must be Borodulin."

"Judging by wha-at?" he said in amazement, thinking she had said "by your face..."

"From the winter road!" she reminded him. "Wasn't your photograph up in front of the management office?"

"Ah... That means you've been in Barakhsan quite a while..."

"And we haven't met yet?" she laughed, anticipating the next question. "My name's Elena... But no funny business, agreed?" And she wiggled her hand in the air.

She began visiting the excavator more often and they were soon on friendly terms. She was naively amazed at the ease with which he handled the complicated machine, tried sitting at the controls herself, and did nothing more than tease him with her nearness.

"What's interesting about it here?" he said discouragingly, ashamed of the oil on his hands. "Blocks, a boom, a shovel, everything in front of your nose, all bits and pieces... It's better to watch from a distance; then it's not a machine, it's sheer joy!"

"But you're being modest, Alexei..." she said in an affectionately mocking tone of voice, touching him accidentally with breast or her elbow, but not allowing any familiarities.

He did not know that, before she turned up at the dam, Elena had been watching him for a long time through the Met Station window. She could hardly, in the darkness of the cab, distinguish the handkerchief with which Borodulin covered his head, but she could clearly see the yellow box of the excavator, the boom articulated like a bent arm, and the scoop that looked like a shovel. She was involuntarily enchanted by the rhythm with which the boom rose and fell, and then the scoop

soared over the fresh blackness of the dyke and suddenly tipped over. The frozen earth was still dribbling from it when the excavator started turning round for the next load—and so it went on again and again, whenever she looked through the window during her spell on duty. There were many excavators on the project, yet still, when she looked at Borodulin's, even she could say that he had his own style. She did not like the long-boomed "draglines" with a scoop that swung to and fro on cables and, before filling up with soil, was a long time scraping along it, not burrowing into the ground but seeming to rip its hide off. Needless to say, she did not go into technical refinements, but for that reason, perhaps, she was irritated by the clanging scoop, and it seemed unaesthetic to her because it was incomprehensible in its necessity. It was another matter with Borodulin. The cables on his excavator were always stretched taut, they flexed themselves like muscles as they bent and unbent the boom, making the excavator look like an athlete exercising his arm...

She once asked Borodulin:

"Alyosha," she nodded at the controls, "could you work with your eyes closed?"

He laughed, thinking that you could build a dyke without your head, let alone without your eyes.

"The top-class operator," he said, "can move a matchbox on the scoop like a tot glass on a tray."

"And you?"

"Me?"

He looked at her white patent leather shoes, which she had left on the rise, and indicated them with his eyes.

"Watch, Elena Ilyinichna..."

Before Elena was able to grasp what was happening and stop him from playing the fool, the scoop described an arc and for a moment hung

quivering on its cables over the little white stiletto-heeled shoes. Borodulin gently undercut the moss beneath them and the shoes slid into the scoop. Then he casually released one lever and pulled another. Elena's eyes followed the boom through the air, but she was still unable to spot the point at which the shoes slid out of the scoop on the other side of the dyke, as if she had left them there herself.

"What a pity," she thought, "that Nikita didn't see that..." and she impulsively ran her hand over Borodulin's curly hair.

He looked at her quickly. She was smiling, but the smile was fleeting, inhibiting somehow and alien, and he realised that this was all only a game for her, a diversion. She was one of those spiritually unstable women who consider that nothing is impossible for them or beyond their grasp and who themselves often do not know what they are looking for or what they want... He decided that he would rather not complicate their relationship.

"Next time, Elena Ilyinichna, don't leave your shoes ... take more care of them."

She raised her eyebrows in astonishment and some sort of interest dawned in her eyes, but Borodulin, embarrassed because he had expressed himself with an innuendo, abruptly stopped the platform so that Elena could get out of the cab without difficulty. The gesture proved more telling than mere words.

"You're an awkward cuss, but you're charming, Alyosha. Remember that!" she smiled, thereby having the last word. She jumped down, leaving two small identations in the damp clay—an impression of bare heels, and that was all.

Afterwards, he regretted that it had worked out like that. Time was passing, everything was shaping out differently. The woman had offered herself to him, you might say, she was just short

of stripping off, while he was champing at the bit. If she came again, perhaps the same would happen again, but he had never expected that luck would favour him with such an encounter as this of all times...

When he told her where he was going and why, her eyes flashed ominously with a cold, cutting light, Borodulin only saw that flash for a moment, perhaps even less—a fraction of a second that could not be measured—but that rivetting, hypnotic look was irresistible, and everything in him involuntarily tensed up, every muscle, every fold. It was hard not to look at Elena, but something still gave him the strength to restrain himself—perhaps the consciousness of impending danger. They were already approaching the bridge across the Aniva, and on the road, in the glare of the headlamps, people were darting about frantically, frightened by the sudden unbridled roar of the dump-truck as it hurled itself at them. They scattered and dashed to the verge almost from under the wheels, shaking their fists after the lorry and cursing it to high heaven. But all this was incidental and haphazard, not the most important thing now, as if they were not real people and it was not a real road. Even so, although Borodulin's nerves were as tough as steel hawsers, he was conscious of a mounting alarm. He found his own explanation for it: all this was emanating from the woman beside him. She was, as it were, burning him with her eyes, and Borodulin could not help submitting; again he took his eyes off the black, furry mass of asphalt rolling under the wheels—Elena was indeed looking at him, and then he shouted roughly at her: "Stop staring or you'll dislocate your neck!"

Everything became mundane and normal once more.

Yes, he had given her a lift at the fork, and she had once left him at the excavator without saying

goodbye, and, probably, that was why he had always known that he would meet her again, as today; but this was Borodulin's last day in Barakhsan, and Elena might have guessed as much...

The solitary office van with its windows lit up flashed by below, and the wheels in their serrated tyres had already rolled on to the timber deck of the bridge and, feeling that the road was nearly at an end, Borodulin trembled inwardly: if it were possible, if the road beyond the bridge did not swing round in a steep turn to the dam-site, he would tear along it without looking back at Barakhsan, and to hell with that stone behind his back, and the hills, and the blasted tundra, and that bitch goddess of fame whose eyes he would be only too happy to gouge out...

Here, everything was a mirage, even the vistas. The distance was infinite, but if you went at it, it would be like going into a brick wall, you'd never get through it. Right now he could have done with at least some kind of path into the thickets, so that not even a dog could pick up the scent—he and Elena would have Barakhsan there, and the warm Crimean coast...

Elena seemed submissive to him and game for anything now; the only kind of woman he wanted in his life was one ready to fall with her eyes closed into the abyss with him.

The empty spans of the bridge boomed. The builders looked round in fright at the lorry, thinking that the operation had started, but, sounding his horn non-stop, he deliberately missed the turn to the left and to hell with the road-sign, it wasn't the end, there were another six kilometres to the airfield! That was where his luck lay in store for him.

And after that, what? After? Perhaps the lorry would take off at the airfield. What else?..

"I go left, to the Met Station," said a bored and

fatigued voice beside him.

And from that sentence alone, cold as an ice-floe, Borodulin was thrown into a fever. He realised that it was not that kind of woman at his side...

Without answering her, Borodulin, as he had once done on the winter route, with all the fury of which he was capable, pulled the wheel sharply over. Its engine spluttering at the overload, the lorry shot at an angle into a ditch, but was thrown by inertia on to the verge. Turning round on the tundra, frozen now that it was almost morning, with the grass crunching under the wheels, he did an exactly similar dive on to the road, half-expecting the engine stall to at the overload. But it was not so fated, or it was not a machine he had got but a wild beast. The lorry straightened itself out a little later, as if it knew the road itself, swung its bonnet to the right, taking Borodulin to the slope down to the left platform. Borodulin imagined how he would do a tight turn back up to the edge of the river and "Submit, Aniva!"

The slope was steep, but smooth, evened out by Garvila Silin, and Borodulin was hardly aware of the growing speed. He was acting automatically, relying not on consciousness but on feeling, and he knew that he would have time to turn round, stop and sound his horn to attract attention. Then everything would be as he wanted, not the cranks!

He was not going to miss his chance now. And there had not yet been an occasion of someone instead of him, Borodulin, having the last word.

Suddenly the blinding rays of the searchlights lit up the platform and hit him straight in the eyes. It was as if they were being pricked by a thousand needles...

Was it really the cliff? Had he miscalculated?

The end, that meant...

With light-inflamed eyes, he applied the brakes in time and even as the machine was still rolling

down the slope, it seemed to Alexei that it was already flying from the platform into the abyss, into the blackness of the Aniva's waters; he managed to open the right-hand door and shout to Elena:

"Jump!"

It seemed to him that he even pushed her out, but he was dazzled and already losing consciousness. His head fell listlessly on to the wheel. The lorry, its bonnet steaming, was perched on the edge of the cliff. Only one centimetre of rock prevented it from falling.

It was strange how many people—from the bridge and from the right bank—saw the brilliantly illumined platform and the lorry on it, but no one noticed Elena. True, some of those who had scuttled out of the way of Borodulin's lorry on the road afterwards claimed somewhat uncertainly that, judging by the white scarf, there had been a woman riding with Borodulin in the cab. It was hard to believe this, and the rumours really were never confirmed.

The first to reach Borodulin was Korostylev. There were several others with him. He pulled the driver out of the cab, but Borodulin didn't open his eyes. They decided to apply lumps of frozen earth to his bloodless face. He moaned and half-asked, half-announced:

"She's ... drowned..."

"He's delirious," decided Korostylev.

Silin drove up.

"Now then," said Silin, seeing that the confounded rock in the back was in one piece, "thought better of it, you fool? Alexei!" he called, looking round, and was silent, realising everything.

"Take him to hospital," said Vasya with a sigh. "We'll talk afterwards..."

At that moment Odarchenko rang Alimushkin from the office van.

"Pyotr Evseyevich," she said in a shaky voice.

"Emergency. Come at once..."

"What about Basov?" asked Alimushkin.

"They're looking for him, they'll find him soon," she said hurriedly in order to reassure him.

And no one at that moment remembered or mentioned Gatilin.

VII

It was about seven o'clock in the morning when Alimushkin was called over to the office van by the Aniva. Towards morning he managed to doze a little, but his sleep was brief and heavy; he kept having nightmares, apparently from overtiredness. The tension of the last few days was telling on him, and even that night had been an uneasy one for him. In the evening, Alimushkin hunted for Dasha until late at night. He knew that nothing bad could happen to her. After all, as Basov had put it, Dasha was not alone at the Rapids; she was with Anya Odarchenko. And it had seemed easier to find Odarchenko first, but in vain had Alimushkin rushed from one busy place to another, as if on purpose, no one met them and no one could tell Alimushkin anything definite. He would never have thought that anyone could easily get lost in Barakhsan. All he could do was stay where he was and wait for Dasha at home. She was bound to turn up, so Alimushkin reluctantly dismissed the duty car and returned home.

As he paced up and down his room, Alimushkin kept glancing at the clock until it was past midnight and it was already pointless to run out on to the staircase; the main door below was unlikely to slam, nor would women's voices be heard. He smoked heavily, running over in his mind even the insignificant details of his relationship with Dasha and Malyshev, but could find no reason why Dasha should have been offended by him. The incomprehensibility and uncertainty of a situation

in which he was, in a manner of speaking, guilty before Dasha (otherwise why had she not come?) but when he was not to blame, was driving him round the bend. At such moments Alimushkin feared in the depths of his soul that Dasha's feelings for him, after turning her head, would quickly weaken, and although even earlier she had several times guessed from his letter that he was in this troubled state of mind, and had done her best to reassure him, but... But what if Dasha had in fact not come for him, but for the river-closing operation? As he thought this, Alimushkin blushed for shame, realising that with this supposition alone he had belittled Dasha, and did not imagine how they would meet or what they would say to one another.

The car in which Alimushkin was driving to the Aniva raced through empty streets. He did not know that he and Dasha had crossed one another's paths—she had come out of a side street on to the avenue when it was still reeking of petrol and the frosty dust whipped up by the car as it sped by.

Wearing a leather coat with a broad travelling bag slung over her shoulder, Dasha was in a hurry. She was walking confidently along unfamiliar streets, the rapid echo of her footsteps ringing out in the silence, but any local inhabitant would easily have spotted her as a stranger. They dressed more simply on working days in Barakhsan; moreover, in her light crackling leather coat, neatly taken in at the waist, and in her very gait, there was something exquisitely citified that betrayed the fashionable girl of the capital.

Without stopping, Dasha walked past the hotel where the room ordered by Basov awaited her, past the post office—a singlestoried prefabricated building with wide windows. Somewhere inside, behind the dense foliage of the pot plants, a desk-lamp was burning and there was a glimpse of a woman's silhouette—no doubt the duty operator

dozing at the telegraph. Dasha slowed down just a little. She wanted house number sixteen immediately after the post office, as Alimushkin had written. The entrance was in the courtyard, she remembered, and she had to go up to the second floor, turn right off the stairs, stop outside the door with the number seven on it and ring... This mean that the flat windows should overlook the street.

She looked up. A light was burning in the windows on the second floor. He was in...

The flights of stairs were steep, and while she was climbing them, she never got the chance to draw breath. Her heart was beating like a bell, and her footsteps seemed noisy. Finally, going up to the door, Dasha hurriedly pressed the bell-push and started, deafened by the noise. It wasn't a bell, it was an emergency alarm. She was afraid that such a din might start a furore in the house, but all was quiet. Had she imagined that din? Meanwhile, her eyes fell on a sheet of paper pinned to the door. "D..." she read, "come in! I'll ring shortly. A." Below was the time when he had written it. Dasha automatically checked with her watch. She had missed him by a quarter of an hour...

"How did Alimushkin know I've arrived? Ah, it was Basov who blabbed," guessed Dasha. She took hold of the door-handle and turned it; the door opened with ease.

How many times had Dasha imagined how she would say in a voice disobedient with excitement: "Hullo!" and Alimushkin would embrace her... But it hadn't worked like that, and she didn't know whether this was good or bad. But in expectation of their meeting, however, she was beginning to be aware of a feeling she had never experienced before. She had felt drawn to Alimushkin, rightly divining, behind the external dryness and stiffness, a gentle kind-hearted na-

ture; with him she felt shy of flaunting her irony, and she could talk to him only with the frankness with which she thought about herself. And now she had come to see him... She closed the door and, leaning back against the doorpost, said quietly:

"Hello..."

It was almost intolerably bright in the hall. In the room opposite she glimpsed a piece of red furniture. On the right was the kitchen door, and there was light everywhere, it was peaceful, and there was a fragrance of frosty air from outside mingled with the stale odour of cigarette smoke. Nearby was a hatstand with a mirror and a narrow bench under it. Smiling guiltily—no one had answered her after all—Dasha glanced at herself sideways in the mirror, her hand involuntarily rose to straighten a lock of hair that had fallen from under her beret. Then she took the bag off her shoulder, undid her belt and had just started unbuttoning her coat, when suddenly everything began swimming before her eyes. One hand clutched at the belt buckle, with the other, aware that she was weeping, she carefully wiped her eyes, drying the tears; they were falling on to the waxed parquet floor. Dasha did not know why she was weeping; she had reached the desired shore, and in front of the now silly, now ugly smile on the weeping face, she was ashamed to admit that the shore had proved so far away. "What's the matter with me?" she snivelled, commanding herself to stop. "Why, why, why? If Alimushkin comes and sees me, what'll I do? 'I'm weeping,' I'll tell him," she replied to herself, "I'm weeping and I can't do a thing about it."

There was a loud slam behind her on the stairs and someone's cautious, shuffling footsteps approached to the door. It was unmistakably a man. Dasha froze, listening intently. Behind the door the feet stamped indecisively, someone

coughed warningly, he had already taken hold of the door-handle (the door was not even locked, Dasha remembered it precisely) and she thought she could hear heavy breathing—but it stopped: both of them—Dasha and whoever was standing behind the door—were listening to one another.

Dasha had stopped breathing. Her heart was going like a hammer—thump, thump! Was he going to come in or not? Or perhaps no one had heard her tears, perhaps the man had got up early and had gone out on to the staircase for a smoke.

But when she heard the shuffling slippers again, the sounds were moving away from the door. There was another cough, this time of approval, and the neighbouring door slammed shut.

Dasha turned on tiptoe and latched the door. "Whew," she whispered, abruptly tossing the hair back from her brow. "What a scaredy cat I am..." She now felt as if she were behind a stone wall, and the tears stopped—it helped.

Dasha took her hat and coat off and went into the kitchen, looking with curiosity over the wooden furniture done by a local handyman. The table and stools still smelt of resin. There was hot water in the taps, but she could not see a gas-stove. Instead, there was a small enamelled machine which she took for a washing-machine at first; it was, in fact, a sophisticated electric stove with four hot-plates, an oven and many knobs. It was a little cramped, like all contemporary kitchens; a step one way, a step the other, no room to turn round in; but that didn't matter... In the bathroom there hung a clean towel and there were some fur-trimmed house-slippers—for her. After washing, Dasha made some coffee, and only then did she go into Alimushkin's study. A desk with a telephone, books, papers, an armchair near the magazine table, a divan upholstered in red, a German lampstand... At the window there was an extremely ugly contraption: running the whole

length of the wall, it was a wooden trough—Alimushkin's hot-house or kitchen-garden. Bunches of partly nipped off spring onions were sticking up out of the soil. A yellowing scrap of paper had been pushed down with a match at the end of the row, and something of a dedication was written on it:

Alimushkin,
The fruits of toil are bitter in your garden,
But it flowers underneath an Arctic sky.
Spinning like a top
In a technical hell,
I shall sing your earthly onion
As I once sang about a crust of bread...

And a strange signature: "E squared". Wasn't that Evgeny Evtushenko? Dasha nipped off a stem of onion, put it on her tongue and winced at the bitter taste. "No," she thought, laughing, "I must tell Alimushkin to plant more cucumbers."

On the desk, near the telephone, she saw a second note. "Dasha" was written on a folded sheet of paper, she opened it and began reading:

"Dasha, Daria, my dear!.."—She could hear Alimushkin's voice, restrained and slightly hollow, and in the repetition "Dasha, Daria..." his distraction and tenderness, which brought a lump at her throat again. "I've been waiting for you for ages, and now you've arrived, and I don't know where you are at the moment... I've been called to the river site, but I think you'll come anyway. I've been thinking all night about you, and us, and I realise that I'm badly organised: when things aren't quite the way I want them, it means it's my own fault... Dasha, I must rush. We'll finish talking about this when we meet. Only don't go away, Dasha, I need you.

Alimushkin"

How loveable and funny he was—he was still having doubts; but for her there could be no returning to the past. Not he—she must think whether he needed her, feather-headed and expansive as she was, somewhat silly, and not young any more, if the old Jewish hairdresser in the beauty parlour on New Arbat could allow himself, with the politeness worthy of royalty, to comment that a French wig would suit her excellently... A wig! A grey hair, like a spider's web in the air, heralds the coming of autumn. What woman doesn't know that?

It gave her little joy to think about this, but it didn't matter. Daria will never go away anywhere, Alimushkin...

For some reason she remembered how, in one of his letters, Alimushkin had written: "Dasha, Daria... If I repeat your name three times, a hundred, a million times, if I shout about it to the heavens, will you not hear it?" He had written that when she was in Japan. Well, of course, she didn't hear his call there, simply because, Alimushkin, you should have shouted in Japanese!.. Yes, she had laughed then. But now she wanted to ask. "Can you hear me, Pyotr?" And it was sad to think that the answer would be silence.

Dasha sat in an armchair, pulled the telephone up closer and, propping up her cheek with her hand, expectantly watched the apparatus, ready any moment to snatch up the receiver. The telephone was, of course, a silent, soulless machine; it always rings at the wrong moment, always when it isn't wanted.

And so she had been in Barakhsan since the previous day. She had thought of rushing straight to Alimushkin from the airfield, but Anya's words had upset her.

"I have been instructed to meet you," she said, "and give you a fitting reception."

Not a very brilliant joke, but Dasha asked:

"Instructed by whom?"

"You've frightened our Party Organiser, arriving by air in bad flying weather."

"Alimushkin?" said Dasha in astonishment.

"Yes. So he decided to accord you a worthy welcome."

The elegant little Anya with the white, somewhat doll-like face framed with fair hair and with the curved eyelashes over the dark-blue, also round eyes, was laughing merrily—perhaps at Alimushkin, perhaps at herself for being given such an assignment, and Dasha herself responded with a laugh.

"Very well," she said, "then I'm at your disposal..."

But it all turned out offensively awkward. At first, Dasha decided that by some miracle Pyotr had learned of her arrival and must have been expecting her. That not he, but Odarchenko had come to meet her, could only be the result of one thing—Alimushkin was busy at that particular time. She understood that on the eve of the river-closing operation he must have a mass of urgent matters to deal with; in any case, he would have abandoned anything of secondary importance and, would have hurried off to meet her. But..."

But this pleasant misapprehension did not last very long. Anya told her frankly about Alimushkin's conversation with the duty despatcher at the airfield. She added on her own account:

"They took you for such a big cheese that even I was scared which way to approach you..."

"Which means," realised Daria uneasily, "he doesn't know it's me... How can that be? What should I do now?"

Anya, who even earlier felt that Dasha trusted her implicitly, had her own plans about what to do, where to go and when. She first of all took Dasha to the Rapids, to show her the Aniva waterfall by the full light of day, perhaps the only

one in the Arctic which, if they blocked the Aniva, would cease to exist tomorrow. And just there, at the Rapids, having decided not to contradict fate, Dasha met Basov.

On meeting her face to face, Basov did not seem surprised. He joyfully squeezed her shoulders and unexpectedly asked:

"Well, Dasha ... glad to see you. How's your problem?"

"What problem?"

"Women's liberation."

"Aah ... it's reached its logical conclusion and has turned into its opposite," she said with a laugh.

"Meaning?" and he rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"The problem now is men's liberation."

"Dasha," and he laughed too, "you're a progressive woman! One-nil in your favour... Anyway, I'm happy for you and pleased to see you."

And they began talking about Malyshev.

"Papa's worried... You know, he was intending to fly, but the doctors ... bad weather forecast... I can walk it myself, I told him, but you stay where you are. He wants you to come to Moscow after you've blocked the river."

She had the impression that Basov, alert, vigorous, always mobile, looked somehow listless and was even listening absent-mindedly to the news about Malyshev. This could be because of fatigue. Basov's face was drawn, the nose was prominent, and an uncommonly sharp fold had set round the mouth. Had he aged? Or ... troubles? This wasn't the time to talk to him, although she felt impelled to do so and there was something to discuss. She understood that even if he were relieved somewhat of his cares and sufferings, the chief of the river-closing operation did not belong to himself any more for a long time before an operation and, of course, she did not reach for her

notepad to take a hasty interview—she knew, anyway, her retentive memory would prompt her afterwards with the details of that fleeting encounter. He would not have refused to talk, but she let him off.

"We'll talk tomorrow, shall we, Basov? Okay?"

"If we block it successfully..." He understood her and reminded her: "Let Alimushkin know and he'll dance for joy." And he wagged his finger at her.

Basov was Basov, you couldn't win. Alimushkin could blush to the ears at Basov's hint, but what was the use of hiding anything? Even her father knew all about it. On flying to Barakhsan, she had wanted to warn him and had dropped a cautious hint that it was maybe time for her to get married...

"It's long been time, daughter," he said promptly.

"Aren't you going to ask who it is?"

"I know," he replied, suppressing the old man's cunning on his lips. "Alimushkin's a decent fellow, just be happy..."

"How did you know, Papa?"

"Wait," he said, peering craftily at her. "You'll bear a little Alimushkin, and he'll grow up, and then you'll know all about how and where from..."

They never mentioned it again. There was too little time left before she departed, and then, no doubt, her father in some way or other sensed that everything was not yet finally settled between the two of them. Only when she was leaving did he take her hand in his to detain her for a moment, saying gravely:

"I'm truly happy for you."

"And for him?" she asked.

"For him too," the old man nodded. "If he doesn't knock my block off for you. A son-in-law's a son-in-law, but this one's got principles."

"He'll be delighted to hear what you said."

Her father half-closed his eyes.

On the way, as she recalled this scene, Dasha was again troubled, and more than she had been at home. Her father's consent, a kind of submissiveness on his part and his trembling voice as he said "I know" made her feel sorry for him. She realised that he was truly happy for her, but at this point it became patent to her that in the life of the old man, in the life of Tikhon Malyshev, not the academician, not the world-famous scientist and teacher who had taught several generations of experts, some of whom could be already as famous as he, but in his life as an ageing, helpless father, this joy for his daughter was, perhaps, his last, and that was why it was so sad and touching. And so Dasha's pride for herself was mingled with a feeling of incomprehensible guilt; she even began to have doubts: should she not renounce it all for her father's sake? But she was already experiencing something else that was higher than love and devotion to a father, and she could not make that renunciation... Many mysteries existed in the world, they came into being every year and hour and died; man strove to fathom them, and paid with his life for that knowledge; and now it was turning out (memory itself obligingly suggested it to her as something old and forgotten, but once heard in the remote past): you will forget your mother and father and become attached to a woman, your wife... Weren't those ancient words about her and for her? And, as it turned out, the one did not contradict the other.

Her father understood this, but she, like any empty sound, had missed them once and now something simple and eternal as a truth was being revealed to her: the seed grows in order to engender the seed.

She was no longer asking herself why nature had endowed woman with beauty, in the name of what it had given her bodily proportions,

irreproachable roundedness of form, softness and fragrance of skin, wavy, free-flowing hair and suppleness of waist; why the voice gently rising from the breast, and the fine, animated features... But she lived by all this and felt the resilient throbbing of the blood in her veins, and her body, awaiting caresses and motherhood, seemed to be rising and falling on waves and her head was whirling for no good reason.

Her hands sank on to the desk, she let her head fall on to them and was about to burst into tears when she suddenly imagined she heard the telephone ringing. Raising her head, she looked in bewilderment at the apparatus, as if the receiver itself should start talking to her; then she remembered that she was at Alimushkin's and on her own. But the telephone was silent again. If it had been Alimushkin, he would have waited longer before hanging up.

And, perhaps because at that moment, even at Alimushkin's flat, she felt her loneliness particularly keenly, Dasha regretted that she had not been living in Barakhsan all those days and years.

She often used to talk to her father in Moscow about the project and about Alimushkin, feeling that her father had a soft spot in his heart to the awkward—either timid and shy or explosively direct—Alimushkin. She even knew in what respect. He could not have helped but liked a remark about the obstacles on the road to progress. They both took the word "obstacles" to mean, in essence, the same thing—all that cunning machinery of the career officials for whom any kind of work was merely a means for the achievement of personal ambition. And her father called this naturally intolerable attitude more cruelly "a floor"—she remembered one of his favourite words. For such people, standardised, stereotyped thinking, ruling out the slightest degree not so much of risk but even of independence,

was a form of self-defence. The most paradoxical thing was that the majority of them regarded themselves as champions of the new ideas, the "ideas of the age". Her father had often clashed violently with such people—Dasha had heard from him about Khoteyev, once an infallible authority on hydraulic engineering, and about the pupils of that same Khoteyev, but it was not merely a matter, her father used to say, of tearing the mask off them. That was not the most important thing... "If the emperor's got no clothes," her father would say, laughing, "then it's obvious to everybody. You won't hide nakedness with slogans, least of all nakedness of thought... The main thing was to counter them with others of a truly scientific bent, to find such people, teach them, educate them, help them." He undoubtedly regarded Basov as one of these. That was why he spent so much time and energy, was so attentive and helpful to each one in whom he detected the glimmerings of original thought.

Not long before Dasha left for Barakhsan, he had noticed a brief magazine article about the building of a single-span bridge over the Aniva. At the suggestion of a worker in the Bureau of Rationalisation and Inventions, a certain Ivanetsky, apparently an engineer, the bridge trusses had been assembled beforehand on the bank and then had been moved on rollers from bank to bank and fixed on their supports.

"Ivanetsky? Who might he be?" wondered Malyshev. He had never heard that name before, but thirty or forty years ago, Malyshev himself, still young and unknown, had used exactly the same method...

Strange, was it not?

For the rather inadequate technology of that time, this intelligent and simple solution had saved the builders' bacon... It was interesting that a similar situation should have developed in

Barakhsan.

The builders had been promised many powerful cranes after the assembly of which the building of the bridge would not give raise to any technical complications. But promises are easily made. Meanwhile, the Barakhsanites had not received their cranes and the need for the bridge had become extremely urgent. How, they were asking, are we to get out of this predicament?

It was entirely logical, thought Malyshev, that someone had thought up an identical solution. But he knew that the obvious occurs to far from everybody. It calls for a special cast of mind, perhaps, above all, for independence of thought. And Malyshev expected and wanted to think that this Ivanetsky must be an interesting and original person.

If so, it was almost certain that he must also have unfulfilled and somewhat cranky ideas and schemes of the kind Malyshev himself had once conceived. While allowing this, Malyshev was annoyed in advance; how could Basov, of all people, and Alimushkin have overlooked a man like that? He'd give them hell!

One circumstance, nevertheless, put him on his guard. The item about Ivanetsky had been signed by Skvarsky, editor of the Aniva newspaper. There are many Skvarskys in this world, but there was a certain one whom the academician knew and remembered—true, not a newspaperman but a hydraulics engineer, and, what was worse, a pupil of Khoteyev, and Khoteyev had put everything he knew into the Skvarsky Malyshev had known. Malyshev did not want to remember the details, much less involve outsiders with them. Only Dasha, who was helping her father to copy out his diaries, was familiar with the many little knots tied by Khoteyev at various times and for various reasons. She had heard of Skvarsky too... It would be all the more unpleasant if those knots

had come together again on the Aniva—they would have to be untangled. Who could help him in this better than his daughter? Dasha agreed.

From the very first moment of their meeting on the airfield, Anya Odarchenko, moved by a spirit of hospitality, voluntarily took Dasha under her wing. It seemed to her that for anyone arriving in Barakhsan for the first time, it was enough that they should be shown the city, the Rapids, the Aniva, and be escorted over the vertiginous terraces of Fraternity Rock, where you were sprayed from head to foot by the waterfall, then go down to the sleeve of the diversion tunnel, listen with your cheek pressed to the damp granite to the Aniva roaring over the maternal bed, behind the thick stone vault. Perhaps you would arrive at a better understanding the North and that for which they were shivering with cold here, regardless of the difficulties.

Although she was tired after her journey, Dasha was in raptures. In the evening, when they were having a supper in the canteen (not in the restaurant, where Alimushkin was looking for them), Anya was discreetly curious.

"Have you just come to see the river-closing?"

"There are other things too," admitted Dasha.

From the way she spoke, with restraint and mirthlessly, Anya realised that these matters were not pleasant.

"I didn't time my arrival properly..." added Dasha. "I thought I'd have time to see Ivanetsky before the operation—there is someone of that name here, isn't there? Now I'll have to postpone it; it's dark outside."

"I don't know what your problem is," said Anya with a polite smile, "but I can take you to him. No one's asleep tonight anyway; it's the big day tomorrow."

...Ivanetsky had a room in the hostel. He

answered the knock on the door immediately, as if he had been expecting it; but if he had been expecting visitors, Anya and Dasha were clearly not the ones. Anya's appearance embarrassed him. Like most ambitious people, he suffered from an unaccountable irritation at the thought of people who had achieved much with comparative ease, and in his opinion, Anya was one of these. Ivanetsky remembered how she had objected to his appointment to the winter road, and although Anya had proved right, he had nevertheless felt inclined to say to her that in Barakhsan it was easy to argue and pick faults—this was right and that was wrong; but she might like to try it in the tundra, when the lorries skid on every rut, the men are desperate, the abandoned lorries are being covered with snow in front of your eyes, and there's no knowing yet how to account for them. Not everyone could pull through that, not even you, my dear woman! On the other hand, anyone who's come through it and has survived humiliation and not been broken—even if not in public, even if only in his soul, for himself—such a person is capable of a great deal. Sooner or later she would have to admit it...

Everything that Ivanetsky was thinking about flared up in him as surprise, wariness, readiness to defend himself and go into the attack. Incapable of concealing his unease, he hastily jumped up from the bed and hurried to remove some pieces of bread from the table, to push a bottle of fermented milk somewhere out of sight from the window-sill, and the blanket had to be straightened, and something else had to be done that he had overlooked... Oh, yes, he should invite the guests to take off their hats and coats.

Dasha was trying not to notice his fuss and the untidiness in the room. Anya smiled ironically as she watched Ivanetsky's efforts. Put off by that smile, he turned gloomy, left the bottle without

even bothering to take it to the chest in the corner. He swept the dry crumbs off the table with the palm of his hand and dropped them on to a newspaper lying on the chair.

"Can I be of any service to you?" he asked.

Anya turned to Dasha.

"Take off your coat," she suggested. "There'll be no courtesies from the host. He's all wrapped up in himself."

As if delighted by Anya's displeasure, Ivanetsky vengefully stressed:

"The bachelor life!"

"You should be ashamed of yourself. Life..."

Dasha furtively touched Anya's sleeve. Why was she acting like this?

"Take no notice," she said. "There's been a long standing romance between us. Isn't that right, Ivanetsky? Are you flourishing in your proud solitude?.."

He did not reply. He nodded silently to Dasha when she introduced herself, sat down on the bed, interlaced his fingers and cracked them, indicating that he was ready to listen. Dasha reminded him of the magazine article, explained that she was intending to write about the Aniva rationalisers, perhaps about him, and she wanted to know how he got the idea of the bridge...

She paused.

"Ideas float about in the air..." commented Ivanetsky phlegmatically.

"More specifically?"

"More specifically? I can name ten of the best rationalisers, and some of them even have patents! A bridge is nothing to write home about under the circumstances... It was out of necessity; we had no option, so we thought it up... Write it down." Ivanetsky warmed up, spoke with self-assurance and, rubbing the red sideburns on his cheeks, continued: "I'll dictate whom you should mention..."

But Dasha was in no hurry to start writing on her notepad.

"Statistics," she objected, frowning slightly, "give no idea of human beings. They're no substitute for living society... personal contacts..."

"But I'm an unsuitable candidate," he interrupted. "I'm surprised Odarchenko didn't warn you..." And he glanced defiantly at Anya.

"I warned her," said Anya, not to be outdone, "but you aren't the kind of person to walk or drive round..."

"So much the better. The position's clear. Shall we change the subject?" he suggested. "We still won't get anywhere."

"It maybe that we won't get anywhere," agreed Dasha. "All the same, there's one question I would like..."

"Answered? Please, if it's in my own interest."

"I've heard you got a substantial award."

"For the idea," he explained, and he shrugged his shoulders. "Yes, I did."

"The system of assembly you proposed has been known in bridge-building practice for quite some time. There is even an inventor... All this has to be explained somehow."

"How 'explained'?" Ivanetsky did not understand.

He cracked his fingers again, but involuntarily this time, and in his agitation he uneasily transferred his gaze from Dasha to Anya, as if to say, "Why this?" Anya was sitting opposite him with a glum expression, the flat of her small hand pressed to her cheek. She was regretting the recent duel with him and had now firmly decided not to intervene in the conversation, but as the point of what Dasha was saying got through to her, a flush began spreading over her face. Distractedly, with incredulity she asked Dasha,

"What d'you mean? Are you talking about our bridge? But everybody thought about it... It's just

that he"—she nodded at Ivanetsky—"was quicker on the ball than the rest. We had six or seven options, and his was acknowledged as the best... No, there's some kind of misunderstanding here," she was showing signs of agitation. "Perhaps pure coincidence."

"You think so?" Dasha sighed and looked sternly at Ivanetsky. "D'you believe so too?"

Ivanetsky nodded quickly, but it was too much for him (this woman who had just flown from Moscow knew a thing or two) and he looked away. His hands, unoccupied, tightened into a ball, but the bony fingers were trembling slightly. To hide his agitation, he was going to loosen his shirt collar, but his hand involuntarily went higher and covered his face.

"Ivanetsky!.." it was almost a sob from Anya. She couldn't believe it.

But he smiled helplessly.

"Well? The North is the North... It dictates its own laws..."

"No drama, please," interrupted Anya. She was ashamed for him and felt embarrassed in front of Dasha.

His red, curly hair, when he covered his face, fell on to the thin, long wrists. His hands were white; the bones of the joints stood out in relief and this somehow created the impression that Ivanetsky was unstable and nervous. Such people tend to catch fire easily, but rarely finish what they have begun and fizzle out quickly... And Dasha, when she had reached this conclusion, found him uninteresting, a bore, and so his room seemed dismal to her hung with the coloured tasteless pictures from foreign calendars which looked particularly garish on the bare walls. It was untidy. The massive round table in the middle, to make things worse, was covered with a faded and crumbling oilcloth. And the airlessness—the stale smell of corridors... It was time to go. Dasha

knew almost for certain that Ivanetsky was going to name Skvarsky.

"Yes, the North..." repeated Ivanetsky with a touch of sarcasm; he was clearly very much on edge. "You newspaper people (to Dasha) and you activists and propagandists (to Anya) go on a thousand times with fairy tales about bravery, heroism, romance... It's all here, it's true. Only for some reason not one of you ever says that the North is a cage, a monkey-house where a human being has nowhere to hide. Here you go round the bend because of some people, while others go mad because of you. And I had bad luck twice on top of it all: on the winter road, and because I never made any real friends. And then I had two strokes of luck: with the bridge and with Skvarsky. All people have faults, the virtues are also relative in all people, but not everyone is able to understand this and put himself above the conventions, above the rest. Skvarsky didn't look down on me as an outcast; for him I was just a human being and he welcomed me with open arms... He was what's called open-hearted. How many times he said, come and see me, we'll share our miseries together... And it was sheer joy talking to him. He could catch an idea on the wing. And then the bridge came up... I spent over a month on my project, dug through a whole pile of reference books, went to Basov and he"—Ivanetsky chopped the air in front of him—"approved almost at a glance... Then Skvarsky and I got down to it together. Pencils on the desk... He didn't spare me. He took one pencil, put another beside it, put a ruler on top of them and rolled it along... 'Simple, isn't it?' And he laughed. 'In technology,' says he, 'a mass of complicated ideas isn't always useful. In the old days, they used to move mountains, never mind bridges, and we've forgotten it all...' It made no difference to me whose idea it was. It could be Ford's, for all I care. Of

course, I asked him as a matter of form, would he put in the rationalisation personally or with two signatures? 'I'm a newspaperman,' he said. 'Technicians don't have a high opinion of us. If I so much as open my mouth they won't even look at the project. And it's Barakhsan that needs the bridge, not you and me...' Was I supposed to refuse? I made a sketch in one evening and they took it in straightaway."

"Neat!" Anya could not restrain herself. "They slipped it to you, and you were glad to climb up on someone else's back. That'll do, we've heard enough."

She looked enquiringly at Dasha and noticed that she was not really listening. Ivanetsky was evidently not lying, but what of it? Dasha smiled sadly.

"Really..."

Both stood up. Ivanetsky also rose to his feet, and put out his hand as if to detain them.

"Certainly not! Now I've started I've got to finish..."

"That's all, Ivanetsky, that's all."

"Why? Why d'you think I told you all this?"

"Hoping we'd commiserate with you?" jeered Anya in spite of herself. "Feel sorry for you? Tell you to be sensible and honest and not hoax people? How old are you?"

"You must understand!" he shouted. "It wasn't for myself, I was trying..."

Anya looked round in the doorway, and her expression showed that his efforts were in vain.

It was cold and windy outside. Dasha and Odarchenko walked across the square in front of the hostel, turned off towards the club, where music was playing behind the slightly open windows, loud voices could be heard and in the gaps between the curtains, as they fluttered in the wind, they glimpsed couples dancing. They felt like going there, into the noise and din, into the young and

carefree merriment which exuded the odours of light wine, cigarettes, perfume and lipstick. Neither of them had yet calmed down after the conversation with Ivanetsky. His words had stuck to their minds like burrs, and Anya, as if justifying herself to Dasha, spoke with revulsion of vileness, of cowardice. Dasha did not interrupt. She felt tired and was thinking about her own affairs; how her father had been right and vileness is never haphazard. Mistakes are accidental at work, but mistakes in relations with people are the consequence of a corrupt morality.

Dissatisfied with herself and the fact that Dasha was not answering, Anya compressed her lips. Dasha noticed that she was offended and said:

"Don't take offence, Anya. I must say I haven't been listening carefully enough to you..." She took the other woman by the arm. "I was wondering where such people come from, and why."

"It doesn't matter," Anya was not hard to appease and had forgiven her already. "You'll be even more fed up with me, I'm so... Where am I to take you next? To Skvarsky?"

"Is it far?"

"We're there already," Anya nodded at the brightly lit windows opposite. "You see before you the editorial offices and printing-press of the newspaper *The Aniva Dam Builder.* Everything here is under the same roof. Tomorrow is the festival issue for the river-closing, so that means, Skvarsky is here on duty. Shall I wait?"

"Anya," reproached Dasha, "only together. And please don't think you're in my way. After all there's very little I need to find out..."

"Bear in mind that compared with Skvarsky, Ivanetsky's a babe."

"I realise that, Anya, but what am I to do? I'd put the meeting off till tomorrow, but I don't want Ivanetsky to get one jump ahead of us and tip off Skvarsky..."

The editor of *The Aniva Dam Builder*, of medium height, flabby and balding, with long satin oversleeves was sitting at the desk with a red pencil in his hand and moving his lips as he read. His attitude, the black oversleeves gathered in with a rubber band, the light folds on the somewhat puffy face and, finally, the severity with which he looked at the late visitors, all made him look like an accountant. Dasha felt disappointed. This was clearly not the Skvarsky whom her father had mentioned. In her conception, he ought to be younger, and nothing suited that Skvarsky less than the good-natured smile with which he rose to his feet, quickly throwing his jacket over his shoulders to cover his wide braces, then came towards them, holding out his hand.

"Delighted to see you with us, delighted, colleague!" He bowed slightly to Dasha (Anya had introduced her) and with a sweeping gesture invited them to make themselves comfortable. He spoke jestingly, lightly and even somewhat wildly, no doubt regarding this as chic in conversation with a visitor from the capital. "Not many of you folks here just now, but after all, we've got to close the river! Not an event of world significance, of course, but for us... We're going into a decisive attack!" said Skvarsky emphatically, and he ran the blunt end of his pencil over the headline of the leading article, which consisted of just those words. "Are they telling the truth when they say that Muscovites are being held up by the stay-at-home weather?" he asked, and laughed at his own joke. "But you're still a young woman; how did you get through to the North?"

All this was said out of the politeness in the voice of a busy man, and, indeed, Skvarsky made his apologies and asked for a few minutes to finish reading the column and okay it for the linotype machines.

"You can have a look at the printing-press in the

meantime," he nodded towards an open door on the other side of the corridor from where could be heard the rhythmic clinking of type in the linotype assembler box, "else..."

"I'll have a look at the paper," said Dasha and picked up a newspaper file off the table. "I'm tired out with walking."

Anya left them and went into the print shop.

Skvarsky corrected the column fairly quickly, sighed heavily and rubbed his hands.

"Ready! Now I'm at your service... So how's Moscow? Everything as usual? Haven't you heard anything new about us? We're still waiting for the basic wages to go up or the staff to be increased... Are we wasting our time?"

"I don't know." Dasha shrugged her shoulders. "But Moscow is thriving." She put the newspaper file aside and complimented him: "You work intelligently, with taste... Incidentally," and she suddenly pulled herself up, as if she had nearly forgotten. "Khoteyev sends greetings."

Dasha tried to sound casual: it was possible that the man in front of her only had the name of Skvarsky and had never heard of Khoteyev. Then she would have to apologise for her faulty memory.

"Alexander Mikhailovich?" Skvarsky raised his eyebrows and the wrinkles on his brow came together like the folds of a concertina bellows. "Why didn't you say so at the beginning?" He laughed. "Now I know why you're here in such bad flying weather! His assignments can take you anywhere in the world! He's that sort of man... If you want a typhoon, he'll sign for one. If you need it, just tell him and he'll stop a tsunami..."

Skvarsky certainly didn't give the impression of a man who had been beaten down by life; his laugh was open and infectious, and Dasha thought that it would be easy to get the man talking. Of course, there had been no greetings from

Khoteyev, but the game had started and Dasha deliberately adopted a different tone of voice.

"You're wrong to say that," she objected drily. "Alexander Mikhailovich Khoteyev is a very responsive man."

"You think I'm laughing? Really!" said Skvarsky in amazement. "He and I had our share of troubles. I was young and green, and he was already a giant. Honour and glory... You can't even imagine the standing he had... But it's all gone, he's one of the last," sighed Skvarsky conciliatingly and he smiled at Dasha, obviously pleased that the misunderstanding had been dealt with so quickly. "They'll say of us too one day that we're has-beens... Nothing's eternal on this earth of ours." And he shook his head sadly.

Dasha laughed, indicating the newspaper file. "I've been wondering all this time where the technical knowledge came from... I'd forgotten that you qualified in hydro-engineering, not the humanities. What was it Alexander Mikhailovich said about you? One of our best fledgelings, a sea of hopes and brilliant possibilities... Flattering words."

The eyes of Skvarsky, who was pensively shaking his head with its big bald patches, seemed to be saying: "That's all over." Then came his laugh, cautious at first, like a cough, but gradually becoming softer and more affectionate, like the purring of a cat. He began looking for something in front of him but, noticing Dasha's animation, he put his finger to his lips and pointed to the door. Anya's voice could be heard coming from some distance away, but Dasha took no notice of the warning.

"Don't you regret taking up journalism?" she asked. "Besides, 'company press'... doesn't sound too exciting."

"Naturally..." he agreed. "'Private' car sounds more agreeable than a 'company' car, but we

swallow our pride..." He was undoubtedly proud of himself and his newspaper, and he added: "Moscow may be a long way off, but we sometimes even get your people out of a jam!"

The conversation was now running smoothly and Dasha began agreeing with Skvarsky. The nature of a job, she said, often depended on circumstances which are higher than a man; consequently it was important to adjust oneself so that the work shouldn't become a chore... She was intentionally uttering indisputable truths, and through them could be glimpsed her rapture before Skvarsky—naive, as it must seem to him, and ecstatic. Why not, indeed? Was it not deserved by the man so highly esteemed by Khoteyev? She may have been overdoing it a little, but only through inexperience of people and life, and such helplessness disposes to mutual frankness. Dasha was talking in a matter-of-fact way about youth, about that beautiful time which passes leaving the remarkable aspirations in the soul and also no doubt, ineradicable wrinkles...

"By the way," she qualified in embarrassment, "wrinkles don't make a man older."

"Why, do they spare us?" smiled Skvarsky.

"At least they lend dignity... They suit age..." said Dasha, finding an answer. "Nowadays, in my opinion, there aren't any people whose unfulfilled hopes give them no peace. Everybody has become tolerant of everything... Am I right?"

"Maybe," he said, smiling, but not at her question. It looked as though this bird of passage was flirting with him. And he sighed. Oh, Khoteyev, Khoteyev!.. He could throw dust in people's eyes. And whose eyes? This nonentity's!" His thoughts had already returned to Dasha again. "Hops about like a cricket for a couple of days and goes back with a ten-line piece. The Aniva's been blocked, the teams of so-and-so and so-and-so distinguished themselves on the labour vigil. At

the end, needless to say, new obligations have been undertaken... And yet it is a disgrace! To travel nearly halfway across the world for the sake of a piffling news item like that! Oh, people!.. But is it her fault?" he thought magnanimously, finding an excuse for her. "They sent her, and what she takes back is what she takes back; they won't ask more of her. In any case, he will have to present the girl with a copy of *The Aniva Dam Builder.* Not for nothing has Khoteyev sent her to him... And what is Khoteyev now? A discarded boot... For her he is a big name, presumably... When he sent her here, no doubt he saw her off with the parting words: 'That's where you'll learn about life!' But real life—it is there, one day even this silly girl will understand so much. Moscow is a city into which it is better for the ignorant outsiders not to stick their noses—if you opened your mouth, your hat would fly off, and you'd be lucky not to lose your head... He's only just managed to get away from there himself by the skin of his teeth, but he will come into his own yet!.."

Skvarsky's eyes slid over Dasha's agreeable figure. Not bad, not bad ... would this bird still be proud of having talked to him on the eve of the blocking operation? And he knew that it would happen with her or another... Besides, he could already advise her: "My dear, keep your distance from Khoteyev! No one needs that old boot any more, he's utterly useless. Find stronger, more reliable, more enterprising people. Look for the ones with a future!.." He thought of Gatilin who, if he had not given way to Basov over the river-closing operation, could have become the chief of ministerial department on the next day. Burakhsan thought that Basov would go higher than Gatilin. A typical blunder! Basov was a fanatic; he would build, he would head project after project, but he would not be a leader. He

was too independent, and such people are hard to get on with. He needed a little conservatism, the ballast that gives stability to a ship. But a man is only stable with shortcomings and, moreover, with known ones. So if there aren't any, invent some, and then talk about the command heights... Skvarsky suddenly pulled himself up short; his attention seemed to have wandered away from the conversation with the lady.

Noticing that Skvarsky was not listening to her, that the soft folds on his chin had hardened and that he was bristling like a hedgehog, Dasha asked guiltily:

"Have I offended you in some way, Yuri Borisovich? I'm sorry if I have. I didn't mean to..."

"It's nothing... I was thinking of something else," he confessed. "Where did we stop? On the enthusiasm of youth, you were saying?.. It's always saddening to recall the past." He brightened up, having decided to flatter her a little. "In youth we acquire character and with that we never part; that is what makes it so precious! For the rest of our lives we write and talk about other things, but not about ourselves. For some reason we avoid such topics. Probably because not everyone is capable of understanding, but with you it's simple. You know how to listen..."

Dasha lowered her eyes, afraid that they might give her away.

"Even your praise doesn't seem casual to me." Skvarsky pointed to his newspaper. "You know what's what... Are you in technology yourself? Engineering?"

"Like everyone in our cybernetics age!" Dasha sighed. "A bit here, a bit there, by fits and starts... But style"—and she cheered up—"style, if it exists, can disclose what matters most..."

"Mm, yes... I'm actually an engineer, by education and by temperament. You know, I even

tried to get a thesis accepted in my time... I was let down by my flair for words—I painted it all too brightly, and that's something the technical people don't like."

"I don't know..." Dasha shrugged her shoulders. "In my opinion, your calling lies obviously..."

"Achieved, incidentally, in toil and torment, like everything 'not mine'," he commented with irony.

"I wouldn't change my calling for any thesis," Dasha was trying to catch him on a sore point.

Skvarsky's eyelids, reddened by long reading, fluttered slightly.

"But I have tried all my life to prove the opposite," he objected. "And in general I follow the principle of not diverging from the truth, whatever the cost."

"Then I can only envy you," said Dasha calmly, "if, of course, you've proved it."

"Want to hear a fairy story?" he said, leaning back in his chair. "The man who rejected my thesis is now a top scientist... He was important then too, or rather, well-known. Why d'you suppose he flunked me? The reason is as old as the world itself—vendetta: my tutor was not on good terms with him. True, there's enough of such treachery even now, but that doesn't make it any easier for me... To sum up, my road to science was barred—perhaps for the best, you may say, but I haven't become reconciled to it. Inwardly, of course... Rejected and despised, I devoted myself to unrewarding toil: I read, reviewed and edited countless works by my opponent, sought for mistakes in them and found them! And sent them to him, modestly signed *A Well-Wisher.* And what d'you think? Facts in science are stronger than prejudices; they are irrefutable—and he accepted them..."

Even if Dasha had not known that her father had never received such letters, she would not have believed Skvarsky. Not because he was

talking incoherently and unconvincingly, but when he was actually trying to prove his soundness, his manner was forced and affected, and she felt ashamed to admit that she had allowed it. Even in his imagination, he was complacently revenging himself on Malyshev and demeaning him. It was all so foul, so vile, and the agonised smile that had been hovering on Dasha's lips disappeared. She looked straight at Skvarsky, and, on intercepting her stare, he felt uneasy, as if he had said something superfluous or indecent.

"Why don't you name this person?" she asked.

"But why..." The springs under Skvarsky's chair creaked and with a curt laugh he tried to make a joke of the whole thing. "Do I look the vindictive type?.. And anyway, what names after so many years? It's all like a dream... You couldn't knock my opponent down with an atom bomb now."

"Are you afraid?" Dasha rose to her feet.

"How am I to put it?.." This girl wasn't wheedling him any more, as if she knew exactly what he had left unsaid. Skvarsky also stood up and went on talking, struggling to hide his suspicions and his agitation. "You know, in the back of nowhere, in the North, the past is sometimes taken too much to heart. Perhaps an explanation for this can be found, but you will still realise that people here are cruel in their relations with one another, don't spare one another, and many of them have an unhappy past—hence the North! But I—" and he threw his hands apart—"am an ordinary mortal."

Dasha still could not understand whether Skvarsky was justifying himself or apologising. Perhaps he wanted to be sincere and wanted to arouse her sympathy and compassion; perhaps, she ought not to say who she was, but she could not restrain herself.

"You claim they don't spare one another here,"

she said, repeating his words. "I shall pass that on to Tikhon Svetozarovich."

He nodded and replied in a subdued voice:

"I realised you were Malyshev's daughter some time ago... Don't wait, I shan't try to make you change your mind about anything. But one day you'll be sorry, you'll remember that it's easier to give pain than comfort..."

Dasha turned away without speaking, annoyed that Skvarsky should have had the last word.

Dasha spent the rest of the night at Anya's. Her flat seemed unusual somehow—the sensation occurred at the sight of the second bed in the big room, where there was also a divan. But two writing desks... Why?

Noticing Dasha's bewilderment, Anya explained.

"I was living on my own, but there's a nice girl here now, she's great fun. She arrived by air, there's no room in the hostel, and she was in tears because they wouldn't give her a job for that reason... So I took her in. We get on fine... She's number one now, she's Basov's secretary! And she's got brains. She's on duty now somewhere near Vasya Korostylev. She lost her head and nearly got married to someone. I didn't love him, she says, but I didn't want to hurt his feelings, he was decent young man, he proposed to me. Not everyone of them does that..."

After a moment's silence, Anya answered her own question:

"A decent man... There's lots of decent ones, but the heart needs the right one..."

She said no more about Lyuba, noticing that Dasha was not interested, and went into the kitchen.

Dasha wearily lowered herself on to the divan, stretched while Anya was not there, and casually picked up a book lying open on the arm-rest.

Several lines had been marked. She read them.

"Can you, if you have the inner strength and spiritual stamina for it, stay for long face to face with the pitiless, cold majesty of nature? Will you be able to withstand those endless white snows, the long winter nights, the long weeks when the mountains blot out the sun, enveloping the world around you in darkness? Can you reconcile yourself to all this and love such a place so much as to call it an earthly paradise? If so, come to me and share our company on Fox Island."

"Well put!" sighed Dasha, and she smoothed the page.

The words were beautiful, but they slipped out of her mind as into the void; she could not feel them, all this was now so immeasurably far away and alien. The author truly left her unmoved, and yet Alimushkin liked him. And she remembered how Pyotr had laughed once as he said of him: "A pity he was a recluse, or he would have been a truly great man..." Oh, what should have been written was: "Will you be able to bear such people as Skvarsky? Then come here and be happy!"

Anya returned with a teapot and cups. On seeing that Dasha was leafing through the book, she smiled at her and declaimed from memory:

"For us, that life was what it should be—complete and peaceful: love without hatred, faith without disenchantment, an ideal life for the man with work-stained hands and an elevated soul..."

"Have you found such a life here?" asked Dasha. "Love without hatred, faith without disenchantment?"

"D'you really think we were looking for paradise here?" said Anya. "Our life's clean—that's what matters most."

"Clean? But where were we today, Anya?"

Anya's expression darkened. She put down the towel and cups and lowered herself pensively on to the chair opposite.

"It takes all sorts to make a world," she said, "and not everyone gets the chance..."

"What?" asked Dasha, puzzled.

"Why, with work-stained hands and an elevated soul, or maybe on the contrary, with a work-stained soul and elevated hands..."

"So Kent was wrong?"

"There were twenty of us here once, and we lived the way he writes. Just the North, the tundra, the Aniva, and no one else!.. And the cold—our hands weren't used to it and they got so swollen that we couldn't take our gloves off. We'd listen to the radio and we couldn't believe it possible that somewhere it was May and the orchards were in blossom... Then the snows here melted suddenly, and one day the tundra turned green. The ice started moving. It was smashed up and churned round in the Rapids as in a mincing machine. We looked at it and thought: 'The project's going to spin us round just like that. Will every one of us hold out?' We were working to the limit. We were so done in by the end of the day that we could hardly stand. And yet in spite of everything life seemed ... no, it didn't seem, it was beautiful! We waited for reinforcements; we knew that when there were plenty of people it would be easier; but it never will be better than it was, and we would hardly agree to Kent's peace and tranquillity a second time. Without contradictions life loses beauty and meaning..."

"Dialectics," agreed Dasha.

Anya laughed and began pouring out the tea.

"We have a saying," she explained. "From Skvarsky to dialectics is one step, from dialectics to Skvarsky—an infinite distance... He's so able to muddle everything."

"To stand everything on its head... That's nothing new in life. That's what Khoteyevism stands on, Anya."

"Khoteyevism," Anya's eyebrows went up.

"From the verb *khotet*?[1]"

"Almost," smiled Dasha. She could see that Anya enjoyed worrying about her.

Anya was incapable of flattery. Frank opinions cost her much trouble, but something masculine, evidently from her stubbornness, could be glimpsed in her character. True, Dasha thought that she too could have been mistaken on that score, although from Anya's words she knew that she was always rushed off her feet and seldom stayed at home on her days off. She'd go off with the boys to a fishing ground in the Red Hills, or she would drive a concert party to the Nganasani on Lake Vachug, or she would organise volunteer Komsomol inspection parties on the building site... She wasn't married yet, but marriage is no hayride for such women.

Dasha looked round attentively. In the wide space between the windows hung glass framed photographs draped with embroidered hand-towels. The red cockerels on the linen and the time-faded photographs all betrayed a penchant for the past and somehow looked very countryfied against the contemporary background.

"Old fashioned?" said Anya, intercepting Dasha's look.

"Not fashionable," admitted Dasha.

"It's my family," Anya realised why Dasha stumbled, but she was not offended. "I brought them from home in hand-towels, so I hung them up here. I could put them away, but I've been used to them since I was a child, and it's for old time's sake..."

"And who's that?"

Dasha indicated a portrait painted in oils and hanging apart from the rest. The face of a young man looked out from a piece of shining dark-blue orgalite, irregularly trimmed round the edges.

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[1] *Khotet*—to desire (in Russ.).—*Tr.*

The eyebrows were knitted intently, but the artist, though not a very skilled one, had nevertheless caught the fine, quivering fold near the lips, and it showed that the youth's earnestness was an affectation. Dark eyes, brows knitted like those of an adult. He was trying to seem older than his years; he looked stubborn but somehow sympathetic.

"That's our Viktor Snegirev," replied Anya, and quickly, so that it was impossible not to notice anything, she changed the subject. "Excuse me, Dasha, please," she said suddenly. "As it happened, I overheard you and Skvarsky talking... It was an accident... You understand, there's noise in the print shop, the machine made a racket. I looked, and the linotype operator and the girl typesetter were chatting away like anything. It turned out that there's a dead zone where voices weren't drowned at all. I went out over there, stood and..." Anya blushed. "I had to go, it wasn't nice... But you know, we always dreamed that the project shouldn't spoil people's lives. There's Malyshev on the one hand..."

"And Skvarsky and Khoteyev on the other?" prompted Dasha.

"Khoteyev... The name rings a bell. I just can't remember where I've heard it before." Like Basov, Anya rubbed the bridge of her nose.

"It's not important." Now that she had mentioned Khoteyev, Dasha felt herself beginning to echo her father. "It's not the names, it's that a man's morality predetermines the motives of his behaviour. Have you had to think why, for instance, doubtful ideas, poor in the technical sense, ever come into existence? Is it only because the inventors are illiterate? They often already know that they're promoting back-work!.. To refer to custom or tradition is no explanation either. It's dogmatism, a floor, and a lot of Khoteyevs are building their welfare on it. But

Khoteyevism isn't dangerous because of that cheap happiness, but because the commercial interests of such people are sometimes boosted up to a stipulation, a standard, a directive. Behind that kind of armour-plating, lack of talent is invulnerable..."

Dasha stopped in mid-phrase, aware, from the way that Anya had started, that she wanted to object. But Anya merely looked put out and asked:

"Where did this Khoteyev spring from?"

Dasha laughed.

"It's no secret. I would have told you about him as well as about Skvarsky, but..."—she glanced at the clock—"Isn't it late? It's the big day tomorrow."

"Sleep? It's certainly late. I have to go on duty in two hours, and I shan't get a nap now..." Glancing at the empty cups in front of them and then at one another, they laughed. "Another cup? I'll make one rightaway..." Anya quickly rose to her feet.

Dasha's story went back to the remote 1920s, when the country was undergoing an upsurge in industrialisation. Her father, then still a graduate of the Moscow Transport Engineering Institute, had submitted a thesis on which Konstantin Apollinarievich Akulov, chairman of the Qualification Commission, a leading hydro-engineer and head of the Directorate of Waterways under the People's Commissariat of Ways and Communications, had written in his own hand: "Leave the project in the Fundamental Library of the Institute." This appreciation opened the road to a future in science, but Malyshev began his career at the Svirstroy project, where he designed the iron sluice gates.

Once, the designers argued about the different versions of the dam: which was better in the

conditions there—a deep concrete upstream toe or a dam with a "spread profile". The discussion was conducted by Alexander Ivanovich Fridman, a well-known scientist and engineer, heading the Department of the Hydro-Engineering Installations of the Moscow Transport Engineering Institute. He was a designer himself and had built many hydraulic complexes. If Malyshev at that time was imitating anyone, it was above all Fridman. Fridman's versatility and the flair with which he got to the very root of a problem were overwhelming. He had the ingrained habit, when a dispute began, of literally "extracting" an opinion out of every person present. This was jokingly known as "Fridman's broken telephone" and they avoided his questions with a standard reply: "No special ideas." Malyshev, who usually kept quiet, answered this time that he supported the first version and preferred a small concrete toe in the centre, reinforced with a steel rabbet, and flushed, awaiting Fridman's questions.

"Can you back your proposal with figures?" Fridman looked at him with interest and almost smiled, knowing that the young are averse to mathematical computations and proofs. "Or shall we take it as a hypothesis?"

"I can produce figures," replied Malyshev.

He made ready to "defend" his proposition, but instead of the proposed half an hour, he only spoke for seven minutes. All the time he suspected that he had missed something vital—but what?.. Fridman would tell him soon enough.

Fridman looked in amuzement at the opposing sides and tugged at his red toothbrush moustache with his fingers.

"Young people, you shouldn't use a sledgehammer to crack a walnut," he said cheerfully. This boded ill. But Fridman continued: "The conclusions of the parties in defence of their versions are equivalent... Each—" and he raised his voice

accusingly "—each has been demonstrating the advantages of his own project only, but an engineer is obliged to choose the optimal version of all those possible!.. Er... Tikhon Svetozarovich..." Is it Tikhon Malyshev with sleeves of an old shirt rolled up to his elbows? Tikhon Svetozarovich? For the first time in his life!—He approached the problem scientifically. He compared the advantages and shortcomings of both versions, calculated, found the optimal solution and, in a word, convinced us!.. We take his proposition as a basis. That's the stuff, my dear builders of socialism!" he said, winding up on a lighter note.

Shortly afterwards, Fridman took Malyshev into the Moscow Canal Construction Directorate where Tikhon Malyshev's colleagues were mainly his recent comrades from the institute. Still "green horns", as Fridman commented, but each knew his onions. They were working on the Moscow-Volga Canal project, not afraid, apparently, that one of the sacred cows of the new trend in hydro-engineering, none other than Alexander Mikhailovich Khoteyev, whose design office was quarted in a posh mansion house on the Moskva River embankment, was going to put his own project in opposition to theirs.

Legends were rife about Khoteyev. He was younger than Malyshev and luckier—he had worked with Genrich Osipovich Graftio, but for some reason had broken away from him, although the name of this man, one of the designers of the Lenin's State Electrification Plan and the creator of the Volkhovstroy project, had long kept Khoteyev in the limelight.

Khoteyev's project was staggeringly original in its simplicity: to build on the Upper Volga a dam forty metres high (inconceivable for those times, but that was the appeal of it), so that the water would run by gravity into the Moskva River,

without the expenditure of energy on auxiliary installations, required for arising the water-level. The ease and the obvious rightness of Khoteyev's solution tempted the non-specialists, but Malyshev was astounded. He knew that Khoteyev was crowned with glory and that to challenge his reputation meant risking his neck, but he went out and took that risk.

The project developed at Moscow Canal Construction Directorate required further elaboration, but the estimated costs had already been worked out, and the route for the canal had been charted across open country, marshes and dense forests, which were of no value to the economy and were unlikely to be of any in the next few decades. This was put up as a challenge to all that was implied by Khoteyev's impressive forty-metre dam; a reservoir holding two and a half billion cubic metres was to flood fertile land. Although Malyshev did not quote the exact figure for the inundated area in his report, he hoped that the members of the commission would easily extract from the cube the degree at which its height was equal to its area.

Malyshev emphasised that, apart from the other disadvantages, Khoteyev had not avoided the construction of a two-hundred-and-fifty-kilometre canal. The earthworks would exceed a billion cubic metres in volume, and the route, plotted with a ruler, ran through quick ground with the extraction of soil to a depth of thirty metres and over... In Malyshev's version, the canal was a hundred kilometres shorter, the earthworks were almost ten times less, and the depth of extraction would seldom exceed the twelve-metre mark. Malyshev's project envisaged water-pressure sluices, but the expenditures were negligible compared with colossal losses that would ensue from the flooding of ploughland. Finally, one more circumstance was in Malyshev's favour:

Khoteyev's dam contained an enormous destructive force; in the event of a breach, a wave as high as a five-storey house could devastate the city.

After Malyshev's circumstantial and calm report to the members of the board, it seemed sacrilege to pronounce the very word "gravity". But Party principles demanded a clear evaluation, and Gleb Krzhizhanovsky said loudly from the platform:

"I am opposed to gravity both in engineering and in Party understanding..."

The government approved the project, which was based mainly on Canal Construction Directorate's development designs.

As the years passed and he came into collision with the inventor of the gravity idea more than once, Malyshev realised that Khoteyev's attitude engendered servility in science, intrigue, flattery and idle talk. And all this did not vanish with the unmasking of Khoteyev, who regarded Malyshev as the cause of his failures. But after all Khoteyev had his giddy flights afterwards and added to his honours many times; but why did he still have to seek friendship with Malyshev?

Malyshev once received a note from Khoteyev: "I am repentant before you, maestro," he wrote. "I am a sinner, but can maturity answer for the mistakes of youth?.. Time itself has given us our appointed places. I am appealing to you to evaluate one of my pupils. It you don't like his work, don't reject it outright. We are both well aware that experience comes with age; I am no longer what you think, and I cannot physically, although I would like to, blaze the trail by which my fellow explorer is proceeding. With deep etc. *Khoteyev.*"

Malyshev re-read the note. "An invitation to the dance," he thought. "But when the fox starts fawning, it undoubtedly has some scheme in mind."

The young man who brought him the note had red eyelids, as if he suffered from trachoma, and was nervous on seeing that Malyshev was deep in thought.

"Excuse me, Professor, but what is your reply?"

"Who are you exactly: a messenger or an entrusted person?"

"In a way..."

"I don't make deals, you see. But this..."

He held the post-graduate's weighty file in his hands and wanted to give it back to him, but you never know—there might be something in it. Khoteyev would not risk getting involved with rubbish, since he knew Malyshev very well.

"Alright," he snapped, "leave this and I'll have a look..."

"I have a special favour to ask," added the petitioner. "For you to be personally present at the examination..."

"Isn't a written appraisal report enough?" asked Malyshev, amused.

"No, the appraisal report will be taken into consideration, but the national press is expected. The members of the council have been warned!"

"Invite the press to a restaurant, it's more amusing there," advised Malyshev.

"Of course..." The other smiled knowingly.

Malyshev read the thesis; more than that, he studied it in detail from cover to cover. A third, if not half of the work, had been compiled from Khoteyev's books, the other half has been borrowed from Malyshev's own works. The attempt to collate and wed the incompatible—the conclusions of practical science and Khoteyev's questionable theories—was as absurd as it was sordid. The very principle betrayed something of the old Khoteyev, with his gravity idea for the vulgarisation of life. Malyshev had no doubt of the prime cause: times had changed and Khoteyev himself was eager to change, to remould himself. Accord-

ing to the scenario of the thesis, they should shake hands. But science is not a house run by the city Communal Administration where the residents club together to pay for the communal services.

The thesis, as was to be expected, failed. Invited to brandy, the press manfully fulfilled their obligations; the two national newspapers carried discussions on the moral profile of the scientist; Malyshev received many letters and appeared in the press himself, and Skvarsky's name was mentioned. After that, Skvarsky disappeared as if he had never existed. Khoteyev left the department, worked for a few years as consultant with various committees, and much later, when certain matters had been forgotten, or were not known by the new people, he surfaced again, this time in the personnel directorate of a ministry. Malyshev only coughed ominously when he heard about this, but he had no desire to tilt at windmills. Only the article in the magazine about engineer Ivanetsky from Barakhsan and particularly the signature at the bottom, Yuri Skvarsky, put him on his guard. He thought that although he had failed to overthrow him, now an old man, Khoteyev could still deliver a blow through Basov. Such a shock could mean a stroke for Malyshev, and could succeed where an aortomitrial valvular disease had failed. However, concern for himself was short-lived. Malyshev could not believe that after so many years he would again have to pull up the tares of Khoteyevism.

...On finishing her story about Khoteyev, Dasha fell silent, in much the same way as recently, especially when she was getting ready to leave for Barakhsan, her father, wrapping his shoulders in an ancient mouse-coloured shawl, used to sit for a long time pensive and unmoving in his study. He almost sank down in the armchair, and when she went into the room, she saw only the hunched

back, the heavy bowed head and the dry bones of the fingers, motionless on the arm rests.

She tried walking silently so as not to disturb him or chase away involuntarily some painful thought; she knew that her father intended to warn Basov, but something was holding him back. He had taught many students. Hadn't he taught them not to fear the heights? Hadn't he told them that fame turns the head? And had he not drummed the most important thing of all into their heads—trueness to the people and oneself? Wasn't that sufficient to confront all possible troubles? Troubles passed, everything passed, but the truth remained. Without an understanding of this, it was hard to stay on your feet, and no patronage could help.

"No," he finally said to Dasha, "it would be better if I asked Basov to send me some celebrated soft reindeer *bakari* with you. Felt boots don't keep an old man's feet warm enough."

Anya looked at the clock—it was time to get ready for duty. She realised that she should not ask for more detailed explanations; nevertheless, she questioned Dasha, apologising for her curiosity with a shy smile.

"How did Malyshev react to Basov's version of closing the Aniva? As you know, Gatilin didn't authorise it..."

Dasha understood her and also smiled.

"There were no two ways about it. Father was pleased for Basov... Was Gatilin not appointed head of operation headquarters for that reason?"

She was curious to know what Anna would say. She could herself have probably gone through many arguments in favour of Basov, but she could not imagine how Gatilin had reacted to this; he was an unknown to her. It was hard to believe that he could have accepted it as necessary...

"Gatilin thought it certain that he would be chief of staff. So we did. All of us," admitted Anya, "wanted Basov, naturally; but if it hadn't been for Alimushkin, we wouldn't have done anything about it. We'd have talked and that would have been all."

"The workers on the sectors and in the teams," continued Anya, "began to get at Alimushkin. Who was going to be chief of staff, and when, and why Gatilin and not Basov whom they knew from the very first day. Gatilin speeded things up. Early in the morning he called Alimushkin to his office and said glumly:

"'Pyotr Evseyevich, let's finalise the composition of the staff! You're dragging it out, and time's passing. All sorts of rumours are getting into circulation... I don't like it.'

"'What d'you mean, Viktor Sergeyevich?'

"'Various things,' he snapped. 'I cannot and will not allow the people to slacken when we've only just tightened the reins. You understand me? This is inadmissible now. I think Basov should be appointed as my deputy in operations headquarters. What's your opinion?'

"But Alimushkin pointed out to him that his own opinion was not yet that of the Party Committee and this was very much an occasion when the secretary had no right to hurry things on a personal basis.

"Alimushkin then asked Basov himself what he thought of Gatilin as chief of operations headquarters. The other pressed his hands palms-down on the table and looked grim, but answered:

"'I'm against Gatilin,' he said, 'and you must understand why. I won't get into a duel with him; I know that he'll close the river if ... if everything works out normally...'

"'I don't quite get it: you object, and yet you say that he'll close the river...'

"'It all depends on the Aniva,' said Nikita. 'I

can feel that river. Gatilin, whether you want it or not, won't take an unnecessary risk...'

"'Yes, he's a sober, calculating man. Not a risker, like you... Isn't that probably a good thing? What more do we need?'

"'You mean I have no right to insist?.. Pyotr, don't you know I've put everything into the Aniva?' Basov ran his hand over his chest. 'I've got nothing left in here, it's all gone to her.'

"'Why? You can insist,' said Alimushkin. 'You're a Party Committee member and so forth... It's important for me to know your point of view, your position, if you have one. There'll be a clash; but you and Gatilin are going to have to work together for a few years yet... And I'm going to have my share of troubles with you,' he grinned.

"'In such situations,' said Basov quickly rubbing the bridge of his nose, as he so often did, 'in such situations, people usually say they're not proud... But I have my pride, Alimushkin! With all the resulting consequences.'

"It was after this that Alimushkin proposed at a Party Committee session that the two nominations—Basov and Gatilin—should be discussed. But Gatilin said: 'Perhaps I should stand down?'

"They explained to him what it was about. Korostylev, it was true, couldn't resist a reply. 'You,' he said, 'withdrew your candidature when you objected to Basov's version.' But he wasn't allowed to follow up the subject. They didn't let Korostylev elaborate on the subject—he could continue that one at a trade-union meeting. Even then, the conversation that followed was serious and grim. If usually they paid little attention to friendly criticism followed by applause, here they pointed to Gatilin's brusqueness, bad temper and lack of restraint, especially in relations with the senior staff, and with the workers too; and moreover they said that he should not wheedle (he was prone to that weakness) with workers. The

head of the project did not have to be Number One in everything, for a construction is not a solo performance after all...

"Basov remained, as always, even-tempered and calm. He was sure he would get the Aniva job. People would have backed Gatilin too—on orders, out of conscience and as needful; but they would support Basov with joy. Of course, authority and respect are equally important. But the deciding factor, said Alimushkin, was not even that Basov had been here from the very first day, that the river-closing would be done according to his design, but that at the construction site knew that the calm, smooth, intensely business-like rhythm in work was set by the efforts of the chief engineer.

"Finally, three voted for Gatilin and nine for Basov. Gatilin himself abstained. He was true to himself to the end.

"They say that after the order was promulgated he commented to Alimushkin:

"'Don't you find, Pyotr Evseyevich, that my position is becoming ambiguous in a certain sense?'

"To which Alimushkin replied:

"'No Viktor Sergeyevich. You are now under a double responsibility.'

"He seemed to agree with this. He was a difficult person but he did not let it show."

...As she listened to Anya and thought afterwards about what she had said, Dasha felt that although she had not been present at all these conversations, she understood Alimushkin better than the others. She shared Alimushkin's conviction that a man's prestige is determined not by his appointment, but by his work, his ability in any matter, his skill, and the recognition of this skill, the trust of people is a consequence and not a cause of success. No appointments can of their

own guarantee advantages—in any case, they cannot and should not create them for one person before others, especially when it is a matter of moral right, of responsibility, and Dasha was delighted that her Alimushkin understood and approved of this principle.

She sighed and looked at the telephone. It was silent. Supposing she rang herself? She lifted the receiver and immediately, as if expecting her call, the operator spoke from the switchboard.

"Hullo! Number Five here!"

"Alimushkin, please," requested Dasha.

"Flat or headquarters?" asked a bewildered voice. It probably seemed odd that anyone should be calling Alimushkin from his own flat.

"Headquarters, please."

"I'm putting you through."

A moment later it was his voice in the receiver.

"Alimushkin here."

He said it distinctly and peremptorily, the call had evidently fetched him away from an important conversation, and she said nothing.

"Hello?" he repeated, but his voice had softened, as if he was beginning to realise who could be ringing him so cautiously and hesitantly. "Dasha, is that you?.. Are you at home?"

"Yes, Alimushkin," she said, "I'm at home... I'm at home..." she repeated a little more loudly, so that he should understand.

There was silence for a time at the other end of the line, and she thought that they had been disconnected; but Alimushkin covered the mouthpiece with his hand so that no one could hear him and said hastily:

"Dasha, I'll be right over. I need you badly... Wait!"

She smiled and, without replying, lowered the receiver on to its cradle.

She was at home, and all she had to do now was wait.

VIII

Although Gatilin and Varya were spending most of their joint life apart, Viktor Sergeyevich loved Varya in his way and understood that she would not give him evil counsel. Varya sincerely suffered for him, but she did not and could not know all the subtleties of his relations with Basov—relations, if one admitted it honestly, that were not always straight and consistent. He needed to sort them out himself, but Varya had already drawn her own conclusions after a week in Barakhsan. She could not do without it; she liked it!.. It wasn't that Gatilin did not believe her, but, having understood what his wife was driving at, he cut her short. She ran in tears into the kitchen, giving him and, as Gatilin mockingly noted, herself a breather.

But what next? She was coming back again...

Gatilin realised at a glance that in a matter of moments his wife, if she had not become better-looking, had at least spruced herself up—it looked as though she had forgiven him his outburst.

The long cherry dress, narrowing towards the hem, lay on her more snugly and smartly, concealing the excessive fullness of her figure and even lending her a certain grace. Her short-cut hair, that she hid in Moscow under a wig, made her look younger, also suited her, and her face, framed by the straight, fair hair, was austere and fresh with Aniva water, although there was a slight redness, only just discernible, under her eyes.

There was nothing she had to say to him: Gatilin was delighted that Varya was keeping herself in hand and that there was a young, lively sparkle in her eyes. He always considered that with the years the blue would fade; but no, the colour and the carefree merriment were still there in her eyes as in her girlhood.

Gatilin smiled broadly and opened his arms to embrace her, for without words it was clear that she was going to fall on his chest and, long unaccustomed to tenderness, he kissed her warm temple.

Nothing had yet been said, but Gatilin was already looking at his wife with new eyes, could see the former arrangement of the furniture in the flat, the packed suitcases... And this was so ordinary, so natural for Varya, that he could not resist it and quietly burst out laughing.

"What is it?" she said, astonished.

"Eh?" he asked in his turn, still laughing. "I say, have you got ready for the river-closing operation?" And he nodded at the suitcases.

"Yes," she replied, not taking her head away from his lips. "That is, no, no, of course. I must stay!.."

She disengaged herself from his arms with a scarcely detectable movement, put her hands on the dusty shoulders of his leather jacket and ran her hand over his prickly chin. The cadence of her voice had already changed; she seemed to be asking this time:

"Should I stay?"

He frowned.

"Am I to lay on an Ilyushin or a Tupolev for you?"

"Viktor," she whispered reproachfully. "I'm serious, I really am!"

"I'm not joking either."

"You're nasty, you've turned secretive," she said laughing. "So I decided... What's happened to you? Tell me. You know it helps... I shall help you too. If not here, then back in Moscow, through Khoteyev. But I'm sure that your difficulties..." she demurred, trying to choose the right expression, "are of a local character."

"Just look at you!" he said in amazement, not admitting that there was a grain of truth in her

words. "The way your voice is pitched, it positively bounces... Like the new springs on my car. Where did you learn that?"

She recoiled from him, sat down on the bed, stretched out her legs and, leaning back slightly, rested on her hands. She was looking in front of her; the lobes of her ears, weighed down by the ruby earrings, turned red, as if the light from the stones was falling on them. And although Gatilin could see all this, it seemed to him that Varvara was looking at him as before, only her gaze had become prickly and piercing, like ... like... He could not find exactly the right image for her insight, but he knew that such a sensation occurred when cold X-rays pierced the rib cage and their violet luminescence on the screen clearly showed up not only the ribs, but the dark bag of the heart contracting into a lump. And because he was thinking about this, his live, beating heart also contracted and, as it were, stopped for a moment altogether and, going to Varvara, he paused, and only one thought, expressing neither pain nor terror, flashed through his mind. Is it really all over?

Then he began to imagine that these were the symptoms of a heart attack. "How am I to tell her? And why?" Suddenly, he felt hot... Gatilin awkwardly pulled off his leather coat, threw it on the floor, was going to take hold of the chair, but changed his mind and sank down on to the leather jacket in front of Varya. He must sit like this for a little while to calm down. As if joking and perhaps seriously too, he said in an even voice:

"Shall we sit down a little while before the journey and have a talk?"

Varya compressed her lips.

He remembered that it was now September the twenty-third—which meant that Varya had been in Barakhsan one week.

The day, dawning as a blue mist behind the

window, seemed in advance long to Gatilin, and everything that had been the evening before, and last night, and Varya's arrival and now her departure—all seemed to fuse for him into this unending today. But the twenty-third of September was only approaching, and Varya's first question, which sounded quite ordinary, as if she was filling an enquiry form, made him pull himself together.

"Viktor," she asked, "why did they transfer you from Karadag to Barakhsan?"

Varya, Varya, now look what a conversation you've started!

"Have you ever given it just one thought?" she added.

"First," he said slowly, "I wasn't transferred. Secondly, Varya, are you better informed than me and have you a viewpoint of your own?"

"Well ... imagine it all for a moment!"

"It's difficult," and he smiled frankly. "If only ministers go to you to have their teeth pulled!"

"I know," she said ignoring his sally, "that you weren't working at Karadag recently, but were only fighting off inspectors. One would leave and another arrived. It got to Moscow in the end... That's where it all began! And if it wasn't me that was deciding your fate—and, of course, it wasn't me—then that doesn't mean... In your place I wouldn't be in too much of a hurry to jump to conclusions."

"I wasn't asking you, Varya," he said with a frown. "I was right in Karadag, and I didn't need anyone's protection, yours least of all."

"What kind of protection could there be?" she drawled.

"If it was nepotism, then that's even worse."

As he spoke, Gatilin stood up, shook his jacket, looking for Silin's cigarettes in the pockets, and, after lighting up, went over to the window; Varya looked for a long time at the tired, tense back of

his neck, tilted back, because he was looking up through the window, and there the purple skin bulged over his shirt collar. He must surely be wondering how she could have found out, through whom, and how much she had learnt...

Needless to say, that is just what he was thinking. He was reflecting that for Varya Karadag was a chance episode in his life story. But what did she know? What about the inspectors? And what protection could there have been! True, in Moscow Khoteyev from the personnel directorate had talked to him for a long, studiously long time. Varya, apparently, had mentioned him among her acquaintances. But what did that mean? So much empty noise. Apart from a few casual chats with him during his earlier visits to Moscow, Gatilin hardly knew him, he was sceptical about the man's rumoured omnipotence. On that occasion, however, relying on Khoteyev's being in the know, Gatilin asked why he had been sent for.

Khoteyev—his other names were apparently Alexander Mikhailovich—was surprised.

"The inspectors were sent to you by us!"

Gatilin nodded.

"I'm tired of commissions, I can't work! Untie my hands or... Is the conclusion already known?"

"You're hot-tempered, Viktor Sergeyevich," reprimanded Khoteyev. "Since you've worked in the ministry, you should know that commissions love rounded corners; they prefer recommendations and so forth..." He raised his eyes to the ceiling and laughed at Gatilin's discomfiture. "Never mind, bear up, the matter will soon be settled..."

Next evening, he personally rang Gatilin at his flat. He apologised for calling and announced:

"I've cheerful news for you! Your personal file has been handed to Malyshev. Pray to God, Viktor Sergeyevich..."

People usually clutch at such information and

try to find someone to influence, recommend, appeal. Gatilin reasoned otherwise: let them dismiss him when he was in the right... The Karadag people would still think well of him, if only for the two boxes of irons: oil-rings, ball-bearings, filters and everything else they were short of in Karadag that he had knocked out by hook or by crook with his last bonus. Just so long as Varya, rummaging through his wallet, didn't find the paid bills. She could stage a tougher investigation than any accountant.

Malyshev greeted him with a mixture of vagueness and embarrassment.

"You know," he explained, "they handed me your file with a strange note: 'For Trial'—but I'm not an instrument of the courts." He was silent, looking Gatilin up and down with interest. "And what are you to be 'tried' for, if these—allow me—reports of the inspectors about Karadag are fair?"

"I am being condemned," sighed Gatilin, "simply by the fact that inspectors came, stared, jabbered, shrugged their shoulders and departed."

"And you?"

"I'm an optimist. They didn't object to my measures, so I assumed they approved..."

From Gatilin's management, the conversation moved on to the whole of Karadag construction project, and Gatilin noticed, with some sense of injury, that his innovations, to which he had devoted so much energy and so many years, were of hardly any interest to Malyshev. The other questioned him about the dam, the canals, how the assembly of the distributor was progressing, about hang-ups in planning and supplies, which of them was letting down the project most badly, and, above all, about general morale on the site. Aware that his fate in no way depended on Malyshev, Gatilin unbosomed himself about how hard it had become to work and keep in control. Life had

been tougher before, but the work had gone more smoothly, there had been few pieces on the chessboard; but now, he laughed, with all those learned pawns, even a queen didn't count...

"What's the cause?" asked Malyshev.

"Why," replied Gatilin, weighing every word, since this factor had been hitting him personally hardest of all, "the material stimulus has ceased to be the mainspring of pressure on people, on their attitude... Each wants to work freely, beautifully, seeing work not as an obligation, but as a need and a pleasure. To create such conditions is hard in practice, but it's even worse when no one understands this, or even wants to..."

"Yes," Malyshev chimed in, "you'll get nothing done by the old methods where there are young people now. And that's fair: they have the prospects, the strategic space! But they badly need experience—our experience."

As he observed his visitor, Malyshev noted that he was not devoid of vanity, but this is not the most deadly of earthly sins. He thought Gatilin a down-to-earth, mature administrator, energetic and, judging by his life story, one who had accumulated considerable experience in construction work. He was also undoubtedly a man of strong will and stamina, convinced of his rightness. To oppose endless inspectors and not back down—only a strong man could have the nerve for that... Resilient, well-knit and burly, Gatilin behaved without false modesty and complacency and was slow in his movements; the external manner suggested an inner composure, a habit of thinking. Malyshev did not hide the fact that he was pleased to have met him. As he saw Gatilin out, he said:

"In my opinion, Pyotr Stepanovich needs someone just like you..."

"What Pyotr Stepanovich?" asked Gatilin.

"The minister, of course!" laughed Malyshev,

and Gatilin felt embarrassed; he hadn't the effrontery to ask what this meant.

To reach the minister, Gatilin went through a long series of offices. He was asked many similar questions, and he felt that he was not entirely suitable for the appointment for which he was being considered, since they had doubts about him. There were no grounds for this, if you discounted anonymous letters. If they even began to voice doubts at the ministry's Board's meeting, decided Gatilin, he would thank them for the honour but would categorically reject any offer. Gatilin knew from Khoteyev what had been mentioned in the last character report: "The head of the management showed himself a capable organiser and contributed much to the development of a creative atmosphere in the collective. However, the psychological climate has recently begun to shape out in his disfavour. It is advantageous, in our opinion, having supported the Karadag initiative, to offer Comrade Gatilin a new work sector..."

According to long-established ideas associated with his stay in the ministry, Gatilin expected a long and nerve-racking assessment of his case at the Board's meeting. They would probaly begin to pick on each step, each trifle, demanding explanations for every single thing. He readied himself and drafted statements for the more likely questions. The silence that followed as soon as Khoteyev reported to the members of the Board on Gatilin's questionnaire answers and his service record promised nothing good. The formulation itself seemed strange to him: to approve (or not) Gatilin's initiatives at Karadag and appoint (or not appoint him) head of the management of the Aniva hydroelectric station. But was it possible not to approve and to appoint, or the converse? This meant there was no dependence between what he had been doing and what they could offer him...

The minister, also visibly displeased with Khoteyev's report, gestured impatiently with his hand as he asked for Gatilin's personal file:

"You assume, Alexander Mikhailovich," he asked grimly, "that there is no third option?"

And without deigning to notice Khoteyev's answer, he glanced sharply at Gatilin.

"What's your opinion, Viktor Sergeyevich?"

Gatilin stood up and threw his hands apart.

"You can only skin a goat once."

The minister smiled.

"Also true, especially now that life has confirmed the financial self-sufficiency principle sooner than we did, and we should have helped Gatilin in time..."

This sounded like a reproach. Khoteyev flushed and bent over the table, diligently tracing something with a smart ball-point pen. The minister rapped the papers with his fingertips as if to indicate that he had found just what he wanted, and then read the findings of the commission. He looked significantly at the others present.

"There is a proposal to recommend you for the Aniva," said one of the deputies. The others supported him.

"You understand," said the minister to Gatilin, "why we are unanimous? You have experience, you have the will to work, and you have to go on with your career. It will be harder on the Aniva, but you are a communist and there are wonderful young people there. If you come to terms with them, you will have no equal as a leader. And we"—he raised his voice—"we need personnel with initiative... Finally, Viktor Sergeyevich, don't be shy of learning from the young."

"Or it'll be too late," interjected Khoteyev, and again the minister was displeased at his remark.

After a pause, he enquired if Gatilin had any personal requests or desires—leave, perhaps...

Gatilin thanked him.

"As for leave, I'll have a rest," he joked, "while the papers are going through..."

The procedure for transfer usually dragged on for about a month.

The minister smiled.

"In that case, I wish you success... Wait in the reception room for a short while."

Two minutes later, Gatilin was followed out of the office by a secretary with some papers. She called Gatilin, asked him to sign the office book and handed him the Order, already typewritten. "Point One: release Comrade Gatilin... Point Two: appoint..." So much for that holiday!

"Go to the Accounts Department," said the secretary, leaving him in no doubt that the appointment had gone through, "and draw your travel expenses..."

Remembering that spectacular change in his life, Gatilin felt offended because of his wife. Altogether no fool, she seriously accepted it that the fate of such people as himself depended on the goodwill of the Khoteyevs. Even then, in Moscow, she had not understood his joy, had not understood that the Aniva was a peak in his career, a dream which one could have only once in a lifetime...

As he came out of the ministry that day, he wanted to rush to Varya at once, but it was intolerable to hang about waiting for her an hour and a half in a polyclinic that smelt of ammonium, and so, taking a taxi on Nogin Square, he waved his hand vaguely. Karadag with its thirty-degrees of heat, its low air pressure and its sandstorms was as remote and small as if he was flying over it at altitude of eight thousand metres, but the Aniva seemed somewhere close by; it was only necessary to drive at the red traffic-light, and he shouted to the driver:

"Go where you like, but fast!"

The driver took the taxi down to the embank-

ment and buzzed along streets that Gatilin did not know. Quarter of an hour later, they came out on to the main Ring Road. The red line on the speedometer crawled up like a column of mercury to a hundred, hundred and twenty, and he said to the driver, a young fair-haired lad who was perhaps driving at this speed for the first time: "Don't be afraid, I'll pay all the fines, just keep the wheels humming!.." And the wheels whispered, sang, and roared; the taxi's bonnet shook over the pitted asphalt and Gatilin regretted that the Volga had a fixed roof. He wanted the wind to take his breath away! He pushed open the narrow triangle of the air vent, and the taxi-driver in the dark-blue cap with a yellow badge laughed along with the speed-mad passenger, keeping an eye on the clicking taxi meter and thinking that his passenger must be an artist or a conjurer, as long as he wasn't a crook. He told tedious uninteresting jokes all the time, but they both laughed, and Gatilin decided that he would certainly have to amuse Varya with these stories.

Moscow whirled away from Gatilin to the right, its multi-storey building projects glittering; on the left behind the road embankment, glimmered occasional little factories and old villages that were living out their days. There, the quiet sleepy huts looked lifeless, just like stage-sets, and Gatilin thought that everything big and real began here, at the turn for the Domodedovo airport. He was already enjoying the thought of his forthcoming flight, already savouring those seven hours in the air under the surveillance of a pretty doll from Aeroflot, and then—Hullo, Aniva! Hullo, Comrade Gatilin!

When he called for Varya and told her delightedly about his appointment, Varya questioned him about the details and sighed admonishingly.

"Nothing'll come of you... You're already there"—she spun her hand round over her head to

suggest a propeller. "What contacts have you got? Have you gone to any trouble over it? You could have invited people to the Peking Restaurant at least, but I bet you didn't even give the secretary a chocolate..."

And, indeed, apart from his business and service ties, he had no other contacts. Had Varya, perhaps, been trying to compensate for what he had missed? Otherwise why should she talk about Karadag and make it directly interdependent with Barakhsan?..

Gatilin moved away from the window and sat down at the table opposite Varya, a little nearer to the telephone just in case, and, masking his fatigue with indifference, asked her:

"Have you started something about Karadag? What are the analogies you're worried about?"

Varya smiled.

"Don't fidget, sit beside me. Or have you forgotten we're married?.."

Gatilin shook his head. He glanced at the telephone in self-justification. His pale eyes were stern but, thank goodness, he wasn't frowning.

"As you wish." She leaned forward slightly. "I can't help comparing you with Basov and can't understand why you gave in to him!"

Gatilin scowled, his bushy eyebrows twitched. Really, she's teaching me lessons! But he didn't say anything and for a long time painstakingly shook the ash off his burned cigarette into the ashtray. Previously, such things had not concerned her. Or had she been afraid to go so far? But now?.. Didn't she want to say that she had been mistaken in him?

Guessing the train of his thoughts, Varya hastily objected.

"I don't in the least regret linking my life with yours..."

He detected bitterness, hurt and reproach in her

voice. She was not telling the truth... Why? There was no need to falsify. Or was he mistaken and was this nothing more than feminine distraction or helplessness? It was easy to understand her: she wanted him to become the hero of the day... She would fly to Moscow and they would start asking: "Varvara Timofeyevna, is it about your husband they're writing?.. Gatilin... River-closing operation..." "What's surprising about it?" she would say. "I was on the command platform myself!" For love or money, but give her that platform!

If that was so, Gatilin was ready to forgive his wife this weakness. She had no other cause for distress and there ought not to be any. What else was necessary to a woman behind a husband like Gatilin? She was her own boss, their daughter was grown-up and already marriageable. Obedient. Even the son-in-law would be chosen by Varya to suit her own taste. Not for nothing had she hinted that marriages by contract between the parents of the young couple had become fashionable again, "suitable" matches; and she had someone earmarked, otherwise she would not have raised the subject. Except that Galya was probably turning up her nose... What else could she be worried about? It was highly unlikely that at her age Varya could be dreaming of more degrees and titles, but, in the final analysis, Gatilin was no hindrance here either—she could go ahead! There was no point in considering the other trifles: what was needed and what wasn't—Varya had everything!

Varya could easily read her husband's thoughts from the look on his face. She didn't argue with him: all was well. Daughter, thesis... She could settle down. She had accumulated enough published work to count on backing for a higher degree on the strength of what she had already done. What else was she worried about? Money, perhaps, a car, a country villa—symbols of man's dignity and slavery in the age of progress! Ah,

money! There are many ways of making it, but it always slips out of your hands. A car, even if it's a Volga, isn't worth the trouble, it's a pain. You wear your nerves to a frazzle and there's little joy. A country villa? Varya had one. Not any old place, but a twentieth of a hectare of land under it, so, in anticipation of a better one, she'd sold it... No, Varya would be seriously offended if it was jokingly said that this alone could become her main interest in life. "What rubbish," she would say, flaring up. "It's silly to underestimate anyone like that..."

The hunt for prosperity seemed to Varya like trying to trap a sunbeam flashed by a mirror: you put your hand on it here, but it's already over there: you buy one thing today, and tomorrow they've come up with something else, and so on, without end. She was seeking something stable, unshakeable, unchangeable. It was not easy to distinguish it amid the benefits of which there were so bewildering many these days. She had realised that things by themselves are of no special value; it is the idea they embody that is important. But even an abstract idea could not satisfy Varya. What she was seeking and striving for, had given her no peace for several years, was outraging her self-esteem and spurring her to action—it was the social status that could be called the capital of the age. Status in society determined everything—Varya must convince Gatilin of this and then encourage him.

For some time, Varya had considered herself entitled to count on a situation in which, as Alexander Mikhailovich Khoteyev once put it, there are no great ones above the equals, but there are equals among the great. Khoteyev always expressed himself in somewhat high-flown language; "great" could easily be replaced by "worthy", or "elect", in a word, those of whom there are only a few. Gatilin, in particular, was

destined to take up this position, but she too would have gone with him into that circle by right as his wife. The chance was near, was possible, but it was now slipping from under Gatilin's nose, and her bungler was pretending not to have guessed anything.

Bending still closer to Gatilin in order to straighten up sharply afterwards, she gave free rein to her tongue.

"Yes, my dear, yes! You're nicely organised—you've got it made, your wife's in the boondocks. No grief, no worries and no family squabbles for you. Who wants such sacrifices? Think, one word, daughter—and you've got nothing to say. She's grown up, she was brought up by kind people, but she doesn't know her own father... And I? I ran to and fro between you like a shuttle taxi between railway-stations... Don't think I've been hoarding my grievances. It was hard going for you at Karadag, and if Khoteyev hadn't whisked you out of there, where would you be now? You've nothing to say? Exactly! But here—I've just arrived, they're going to block the river, and I learn from other people that you've been elbowed out of the way. For you, that's in the normal course of things, true? But I remembered the plans you were making when they appointed you to this place. You positively became younger, I was afraid you'd leave me... Come on, look at me, don't turn your eyes away... The head of the management is kneading muck with his hands... Apparently, you agreed of your own free will? Isn't that a joke! Tell me honestly, what are you hoping for? D'you think you'll get preference for that?.. You kept ignoring Khoteyev, and now you're ignoring me too. And after all, I once asked Knoteyev to put you in touch with that old liberal, what's his name?.. Malyshev! And not long ago, before I came here, I talked to Khoteyev about you again... You needn't be afraid, it was in

confidence! I'm not a fool yet... 'How's Gatilin?' I asked; and he—he of all people!—shrugged his shoulders. 'For the time being,' he said, 'he's being sized up here—he has a good name, but the future prospects... There's something strange going on out there in Barakhsan,' he said. 'They haven't got to the bottom of it, but when the head of the management is removed from the river-closing operation...' 'Well, that's his lot!' I think to myself."

"Varya!" shouted Gatilin huskily and he banged the flat of his hand down on the table.

"Don't interrupt!" she said with a smile. "And at least learn to take criticism properly, even if it's only mine... I know you're a decent fellow, and I can understand your view that for Basov the Aniva is his first project, his from beginning to end. Very well, but for you? And if it's the last one? You see how you hurried things up... And Basov's future is assured in any case! But yours?"

"Have you finished?" asked Gatilin dully.

"You crank... Can I correct the mistakes of a lifetime in one talk with you?"

Gatilin frowned at the fine tendril of acrid smoke rising from the end of his cigarette, inhaled for the last time and slowly put out the butt-end. He stood up and suddenly banged his fist on the table. The ashtray jumped. Gatilin transferred his eyes from his fist to Varya, but, unable to see her in his fury, he bellowed in her direction:

"That's how I should knock the nonsense out of you..."

Silence fell in the room. Then a pathetic sniffing was heard in the corner behind the bed.

"I've convinced her," thought Gatilin and took a deep breath. Unbuckling his belt and forgetting to undo the button on his collar, he tore the shirt off his back. The button flew off.

"Just think," he said more mildly, "about what you want and what you're meddling with..."

And he barked into the kitchen, from the corridor, as if it was the only reproach that he could fling at her:

"It wouldn't have done any harm to ask me before you consulted Khoteyev..."

Varya was sensibly silent. At least he had heard her out. There was no hurry now. Everything must be handled with finesse, with intelligence, so that he might think that he had arrived at his own conclusion.

Gatilin knew that Varya had left a great deal unsaid. He stood glumly in the bathroom for a while. Remembering why he had gone there, began rubbing his neck and slapping his cheeks, massaging them before shaving as was his habit.

The mirror reflected the flabby, wrinkled folds on the skin. And in Gatilin's eyes shone the same cruel sparks, as hard as his stubble. Or perhaps not sparks—more like dry grey sand... He studied himself from under his eyebrows and did not like himself—ungainly, baggy-looking somehow—and Varya had always had a fancy for athletic men. Basov, for instance... All roads lead to Rome! Of course, Basov wasn't the reason. In Barakhsan, everything was working out differently from the way Gatilin had envisaged. He was upset that he couldn't say precisely at what point things had started going awry... Even before he had known him, Gatilin has been favourably disposed to Basov because he had no claims to be head of the management. They had offered, but he had refused, and this was important, for it flatly ruled out back-dealing, rivalry and so forth... Gatilin intended to spare Basov; after all, he wasn't trying to pass himself off as a scientist, and was mentally grateful not only to Malyshev and the minister, but even to Khoteyev—the man was, after all, responsible for the personnel selection, and a pair such as Basov and himself could not be found

even by design. But the relationship had not worked out, that is to say, the irreproachable relationship for which Gatilin had been hoping...

Gatilin clamped his jaw tight and stroked the swelling, puffy jowels. It had been unpleasant to give in, but it was even more unpleasant to admit that he hadn't wanted to... No, he hadn't.

Gatilin stared into the mirror for a long time and could not take his eyes away. It was the wrong time to be preoccupied with Basov and Barakhsan, but a man is evidently not always master of himself in such things.

The stare with which Gatilin penetrated, or so he was convinced, to the heart of things and grasped the secret—not merely the thoughts of the other man but the actual foreknowledge of them—this time, reflected in the glass, went into his own depths, into that inaccessible region where a man's beginnings come together. It would have been wrong to say that during these moments Gatilin was thinking, remembering or analysing—he was simply contemplating his inner world, although secretly he felt that his sensations were dominated by a thought that was distasteful to him: for no matter how successful he may have proved himself at Karadag, he had been correspondingly unlucky in Barakhsan... He could find no alternative. It was now given to him to see the past, even the mistakes, but it was impossible to change anything... And the more intently Gatilin peered into himself, as if penetrating the opaqueness of violet smoky twilight, the more distinctly there glimmered in his consciousness, before his inward gaze, something strangely familiar, scattered at random, like the little houses on the outskirts of a big city. The exact name and simile for what he saw had not appeared yet, but the vision glittered alluringly in many colours, and Gatilin knew that the past was not dead like a hieroglyph—it lived in him, was pulsing with

energy; something was fading and going out for a time, but something else was being illumined by vivid flashes of light. There was a kind of dependence beyond his understanding in that radiance. After looking more intently (and that intentness signified a growing nearer, a reduction of the distance between his present self and his past), Gatilin intuitively grasped that the real events taking place in his life had been displaced, subordinating themselves to a certain law and laying bare his relations with Basov.

Gatilin's gaze, as it travelled over the uncomfortable world of memory, suddenly seemed to strike an invisible bell... Gatilin shuddered joyfully, everything in him responded to that weak, almost inaudible sound. He strained towards the lost nest, and the nearer he drew, the bigger the desired picture became and more clearly could he see the outlines of the Barakhsan hills and the cross-country vehicle rolling over the first snow of the tundra, and popping like a motorcycle. Gatilin himself was sitting inside the vehicle with a long sheepskin coat over his leather jacket; Basov was beside the driver, showing him the way. They were heading for Bare Mountain to hunt reindeer...

Not long before, Vantulyaku had visited Barakhsan. He had agreed to take the *lyosa* bosses to the battle trail. The old man promised to wait for them behind the Red Cliffs on Bare Mountain where the reindeer herds were not numerous, but the old stags constantly met the young ones.

"There won't be misfire?" asked Basov.

The old man laughed. He liked the word, and repeated it several times with relish, addressing Basov and Gatilin by turns.

"However, so, so... There won't be misfire!"

He looked at Gatilin with devotion, his eyes

blinking, and the curious and mocking expression seemed to freeze on his face. This was not to Gatilin's liking; his eyebrows twitched angrily and to hide his displeasure he said to the old man:

"We shan't have a 'misfire' either," and he stuck out his little finger and thumb meaningfully...

"Two!" Vantulyaku understood and imitated Gatilin's gesture. "Two bottles! However, we shall drink well..."

About three days before the trip, there had been a heavy fall of warm snow, but almost immediately afterwards the frosts struck again and the tracks of the cross-country vehicle ran smoothly over the tundra, which had been marshy only a month before. The truck was leaving twin ruts streaked with green moss. The trail was distinct, and Gatilin was trying to commit it to memory for some reason. He was not really enthusiastic about the hunt and had agreed to go on the trip more out of curiosity, just for a change. Now, giving everything exceptional significance, he was thinking, as he looked at the sky darkening above and the black banks of shaggy clouds swirling in the strong wind, that a hunt can be singularly successful in bad weather.

They reached Bare Mountain late, at evening. The stove was blazing fiercely in the tumbledown chalet used by the Barakhsan trippers and a kettle was bubbling on the hob. Vantulyaku was sitting at the table with a lamp, checking the hunting stores. After the frost outside, there was a sweet fragrance of tea and fresh meat, probably hare.

The monotonous journey had exhausted Gatilin and knocked the morning optimism out of him. He was already regretting that he had been tempted to come. What kind of a hunt was it going to be! What reindeer would there be when he had not even seen the trail of one, however much he

strained his eyes? They'd wear their feet out for nothing...

At tea, he digressed a little, went off into long and incomprehensible tirades that no one understood, and only when he was fed up with himself did he pester the old man.

"Why don't you say something, Grandad? Come up with a story or something!"

"Or something!" replied the other. "Must get up early," he reminded them for the umpteenth time.

"You just show us a trail! In a wind like this, he'll come up and ask for the bullet personally. I'll lassoo his antlers and command start with the trailer. Straight back to town, isn't that right, Basov?"

"However, no!" Vantulyaku clicked his tongue sadly. "Must pray to the *koika* for them to chase away wind. Wind bad. It blows, we not get reindeer."

Gatilin couldn't understand the Nganasani. And didn't believe him. He pretended to know everything! In the silence, if there was no wind, the noise of a twig snapping could be heard a kilometre off. Then try stalking reindeer! And when the wood cracked, when the animal's antlers were buzzing like a pipe, that was the time to get him at point-blank range and without any fuss.

Being a man of a few words, Vantulyaku did not bother to explain that the reindeer is particularly sensitive in windy weather. Scary. Watchful. Doesn't stay anywhere for long. Can hear much further than he can see. And then if you go after him, you will keep going for a long time, and all in vain.

They got up when it was still dark. They put on their skis, and slung their carbines across their shoulders. Vantulyaku gave each a pair of horsehair stockings as slippery as satin.

"The snow won't creak when we walk over it," he explained.

Two hours' fast skiing took them a long way from the cabin. Gatilin got steamed up, began panting for breath and lagged behind. Vantulyaku gave him a chance to rest a bit. Then he left all the others behind in a birch-wood, asking them to talk as quietly as possible and to listen for the sound of a stag belling. Then he went on ahead. Gatilin scooped up a handful of snow and rubbed his face with it. As he wiped himself dry with his handkerchief, he thought that the mysterious *koika* must indeed have heard the old man's prayer, not a branch in the wood was stirring. The sky was heavily swathed in white clouds so low that they all but touched the tree-tops. When Gatilin coughed, the air stirred overhead like the wind moving dry leaves, and at once an even deeper silence fell, alarming and frightening. It was as if the sounds were being swallowed up by the stiff clouds.

"The old man must be drivelling," said Gatilin in a low voice. "Nikita Leontievich! We'll be ashamed of ourselves if we go back empty-handed, eh? They'll make fun of us."

"Never mind," said Basov, laughing at this, or perhaps at something else.

Vantulyaku called them to the edge of the wood with a low, bird-like whistle. From a distance they could see that the snow there had been trampled into the leaves. The size of the hoofprints showed that a big animal had fed here. The broad, even trail led into a thicket.

"However, old feeding place, damn'd old... We'll look further," announced Vantulyaku.

Now they knew that the reindeer weren't far away, or at least had been there, the going became easier. They kept their eyes open and their ears skinned. Both Basov and Gatilin imagined that the skis were creaking uncommonly loudly. But such attention, not being habitual, could not last long, although keeping quiet was also tiring. Gatilin

asked the old man in a guilty voice.

"Are there any sables here?"

"But no, however," sighed Vantulyaku.

He had his own hopes—he had not trapped sables here for a long time—but he could already see the cross-hatched trails of ermine on the snow, and they cannot tolerate one another. There is no room for stoats where there are sables. The sable will hunt it down and tear it to pieces, or at least drive the creature off its territory.

"They know one another," said Vantulyaku, perhaps proud of the sable.

He indicated a fallen tree, dusted with snow. Tracks as light as those of a cat would round it. The sable, explained the old man, would inevitably walk along a fallen tree, it enjoyed doing so, but the stoat would take no notice and burrow under the snow.

Skirting a small, hilly depression, they made for the higher ground, holding on to the birch copses which the reindeer loves, and they were not mistaken, for they came upon the trail of a herd. When the old man explained that the trail was fresh, Gatilin imagined that he clearly detected an unfamiliar and unaccustomed odour, a kind of fermentation in the air, and he hastily unshouldered his carbine. While Vantulyaku was bobbing about there, if he said anything, he was ready!..

Basov was also losing patience. "Now?" he wanted to ask the Nganasani; but Vantulyaku's behaviour was calm, perhaps a little too unruffled, and Basov, like him, also turned up the earflaps of his hat. Foresight never hurt anyone. He thought he heard hoofbeats, but it was the blood throbbing in his temples.

Old Vantulyaku was also disturbed by the expectation of the hunt, or, to be more exact, was tired because he had really been overexcited at home when, counting the days to the first snowfall and the first hunt, he had ignored his children's

pleas to spend the winter in the warmth with his grandsons, had secretly built up his stores, prepared the sledge and fed the huskies... Now he was at work, there was no time to rest. He would rest when he got the reindeer, because like the old Nganasani, it sensed that life in the tundra was changing. Where the free path of the beast had once been undisturbed, people were now travelling, shouting, churning up the earth, blowing up cliffs, flying about in iron birds. The leader could still take the herd away from the marksman on foot and confuse the trail in the woods; but when the iron bird began pecking with fire and the maddened, disobedient *vazhenki* fled terrified in all directions, the leader lost his authority because he could not rally them when they were dispersed all over the tundra...

With these thoughts running through his mind, Vantulyaku unhurriedly read the trail. A fair-sized herd had passed that way; the leader was taking about fifty young females. They had stayed here for some time, grazing peacefully; the moss under the birch roots had been churned up, the sweet young branches had been gnawed round and the lichen had been torn off the sides of the small frozen pools in the ground.

"Well, are they far away?" whispered Basov.

Vantulyaku picked some dark droppings up off the snow and crushed them in his fist. The dung was frozen and firm, but under the firm, hard shell the old man could feel the waxy softness inside with his sensitive fingers, and this told him a great deal. Without answering Nikita, but his whole manner showing that he disapproved of the young *tugut*'s impatience (how many times had he told him that hunting was patience!), Vantulyaku walked off the herd's trail and stopped in front of a solitary, wide track.

"The leader, however... He went that way!" And he pointed to the wooded hill.

They did not yet know whether they had far to go or not, but dawn was blazing up more brightly, they had to hurry, and at that moment the fragile silence of morning was rent by a prolonged, throaty, gurgling sound, as if someone out there beyond the forest had ripped a gigantic blanket apart. No sooner had the ear become accustomed to it, than the sound became prolonged and more melodious, ever-growing and resembling the blast of a shepherd's horn. This throaty sound, growing all the time and directed into the very height of the heavens, throbbed with passionate, living vibrancy, and each fresh note was higher and more resonant than the one before... It seemed that no beast could call at such a high pitch, but at this point, unexpectedly, as if from a height something fell, was smashed and became silent—everything was quiet.

"Is that really a reindeer calling? It's like one of the trumpets outside Jericho!" Gatilin looked incredulously at the old man and then at Basov. The bellow was, of course, that of a beast, but why so articulate, as if human?

They listened. Snow was falling from the branches here and there, but the bellow did not recur. And it was so clearly him! Was he summoning or warning off?.. Basov and Gatilin began stamping their skis and twisted their heads round. Vantulyaku pounced on them.

"Shh!" He grimly raised a brown finger, scowled at them and snapped irritatedly: "He's listening..."

The challenge flow over the thickets, the vales, travelled as far as the distant hills, fell into the deep hollows, and the young females, tucking up their short tails and pricking up their ears, langurously nudged one another, but not one of them moved from her place, nor did the one who was making the battle challenge. He would repeat his call, louder, more prolonged, but would first

wait for the echo to come back from the hills. And the old hunter also was waiting for this echo so as by some indeterminate and inexplicable means to estimate whence the original sound was coming, and to determine by its strength the distance to the leader and the hill on which he was standing. Then they would take a short cut in that direction without following the meanderings of the reindeer's trail over the deep snow.

When the reverberating, undulating echo rolled back to them, Basov and Gatilin were easily deceived into taking it for the answering call. Vantulyaku grinned; the reindeer might even be a young one, but he was not as hasty as a man—the other, if he had heard, had immediately thrown back his branched antlers and frozen on the spot so as not to be deceived. Perhaps he would quickly snort through hot nostrils that had not yet known the smell of a rival's blood and was now listening and waiting... However, Vantulyaku did not explain the reason for his laughter to the *lyosa* bosses.

"Very near," he said. "Take off skis, there will be noise..."

They stuck the skis upright into the snow to find them easier on their way back to the glade. Vantulyaku advised Gatilin to take off his sheepskin coat. Viktor Sergeyevich would have gladly have shed his jacket too—it was not their legs that were warming the hunters, but the ancestral passion secretly abiding in every man, calling him to battle just like the throaty call challenging the young reindeer. Stepping cautiously in their soft horsehair stockings, they moved off after the Nganasani.

The bellows were occurring more often, now powerful and menacing, now demanding, and in them bubbled a wrathful bewilderment that the long-awaited rival, whose trail the old reindeer had scented on his own path, was not answering. He

was bellowing towards the east, and when the hunters were already halfway to their quarry, somewhere not far away a young, tremulous voice responded at last—his call was also melodious and high-pitched, but shorter. The young one was probably in a hurry, his valour and impatience for battle warmed by his craving to dominate the herd.

Vantulyaku suddenly halted.

In front, what seemed like a sudden gust of wind passed over the sparse woodland, the widely parted branches cracked, the tops of the birch-trees swayed, a small tree was snapped off by a powerful hoof. When all was quiet again and Gatilin impatiently walked past the old man to look at the spreading antlers of the reindeer at least from a distance, Vantulyaku touched his sleeve and motioned with his eyes to a spot some ten paces ahead where a fluffy creature had stopped dead in fright on a bare patch on the snow. It was a stoat, its short black tail, so conspicuous on the snow, coiled uneasily. Its hind legs tucked up, half-rising on its forepaws, the animal tensely craned its neck, following the human beings with malignant, beady eyes. It was less than two feet long, and was not so much an animal as a white fur mitten with a black thumb; but Gatilin recoiled on seeing the saw-like teeth, quivering like those of a rat. The low oval ears were flattened back until they almost touched the nape of the neck; that was why the stubby, snarling muzzle inspired revulsion rather than fear. Nimble and cunning, the stoat is inquisitive by nature, but at the first threat of danger will hurl itself boldly at a man. A lynx might envy its agility. Vantulyaku stepped back warily and, muttering softly, waved his hand slightly as if to say, "Now then, now then, my friend, clear off..." The stoat curled up into a ball preparatory to a spring, but at this point the clashing bellow of

the males blended into a single prolonged, alarmed roar and the little black tail quivered in hesitation...

Vantulyaku frowned. The stoat had scented blood. Hunters dislike it for that reason. Let it better go away!.. Showing that he did not intend to touch it, Vantulyaku lowered his rifle butt into the snow. The stoat lost interest in the indifferent man and scampered off into the thicket in a series of erratic bounds.

Following Vantulyaku in Indian file, they made their way through the dense bushes which thinned out noticeably as they climbed up the hillside, but the going was no easier higher up. The sky over them soon brightened, the bushes opened out and they found themselves on the fringe of the wood. In front, in an open glade, sideways to them, stood a big, broad-chested reindeer. His curved antlers thrown right back, he started a throaty call but suddenly stopped when he saw his young rival coming out of the forest to take up the challenge. He was so surprised that he even ducked his head and the bulging round eyes were suffused with blood. Basov and Gatilin also noticed the young reindeer. He stopped about thirty paces away, and from the heaving of his flanks it was clear that he had covered a fair distance. There was no time for him to survey his opponent and gauge his strength—blind passion was driving him to combat. He charged out into the glade and stood there as if rooted to the spot, forgetting to withdraw one outstretched, sharp-kneed leg. The hump-nosed head was tilted back, the woolly nostrils flared at the smell of alien flesh. The thick, almost brown wool bristled stiffly, the white mane rose and fell spasmodically on his neck, and the young blood seethed, constricted in the resilient veins. The powerful muscles tensed; it looked as though he would soar in a bound at any moment and then it would be all over.

The old leader stood calmly where he was. A subdued light filtered through the murky cloud, neither blinding nor irritating him; but, perhaps, he felt that his rival was delaying out of indecision. He angrily tossed his dark, widely-placed antlers back and forth, but his massive body remained as motionless as a rock. After waiting for a little while longer, as was allowed to him by his dignity, belligerently, with short strokes he pawed the ground in front of him, kicking up frozen divots of earth.

Gatilin held his breath in alarm, as if he too was preparing to leap and every fibre of his being was quivering in the foretaste of an inexplicable joy never felt so keenly and intimately before. He whispered to Basov, holding him by the elbow to prevent him leaning too far out of the bushes:

"Which are you going to have? That one's mine..."

Forewarning Basov, he nodded his head at the mature male, who was angrily and rhythmically pawing the ground with his hood. The clean snow in front of him had already been extensively spattered with reddish crumbs of earth. Even a layman could realise that in the grim dignity and slight impatience of the leader there was far more strength and courage than the young one had, although the latter had accepted the challenge and had come to try his luck. Basov flushed in spite of himself: he would also accept the challenge, and he whispered, after a sigh:

"All right, I agree!.."

After a short but intent study of the two reindeer, Vantulyaku said that the males would leave by different paths. One would go up over the hill to the herd—that would be the path of the victor. The other would go down to where the stream flowed under Bare Mountain—the path of the loser.

"Aim for the heart, however!" he warned Gatilin

for some reason. "Hard to kill a reindeer. Will lash out..."

And he disappeared noiselessly into the undergrowth. Why should he hamper the *lyosa* bosses? Hunting, like work, didn't like this. Besides, the old Nganasani was almost sure that one of them, in too much of a hurry, might miss, and then he would have to finish the wounded animal off... His instinct had told him which would win and, after a moment's thought, he turned on to the young reindeer's path. Even so, Vantulyaku was not as categorical as *lyosa* Basov and *lyosa* Gatilin, who had decided that the two reindeer were not an equal match. True, the old reindeer was tough; he could take on two such young ones. There were many branches on his antlers. Their ribbed palms spread wide apart, like the palms of hands, and were resilient, which would soften the blows... The young male, however, had brighter blood seething in his veins; the wary leader knew this, as he knew that only the *khaptarki* in the herd were devoted to him, but the young *vazhenki* and the passionate *vondelki* were kicking their hind legs, looking sideways at the silly *lonshaki*. The young reindeer was not as experienced in battle as the old one, but he was frisky and fearless, and a sweet feast awaited him after victory, so he would not give way.

...The leader tossed his head again, stepped impatiently over the hole he had pawed in the ground, and at that precise moment the young one suddenly flew at him. They both dropped muzzles slightly, swung their antlers and promptly bounded aside, and Gatilin thought that his reindeer had knocked his rival away with a very painful butt. Either way, the position had changed and their chances were levelling off, because the first did not have the advantage of protection and height, and the second could not get up speed for a second blow. The bony clash of colliding antlers had

inflamed them. They kept charging at one another, retreating, and attacking again, and the hunters soon noticed that each reindeer was trying to push his rival away from the part of the glade where a flesh hole was still noticeable on the churned up snow. The whitish, thinly-branched antlers of the young reindeer curved back resiliently when they collided with the dark, strong antlers of the old leader. Half sitting, or rather shuddering at the blows, both were pushing back on their hooves and forcing one another's muzzles now towards the tops of the birch-trees, now down to the ground. A pink froth, exciting and maddening them both with its fine smell of blood, spurted from the red nostrils and flew off the snarling teeth and so, with locked horns, they danced round in a circle until the ground was black with trampled snow and torn-up divots.

Suddenly the leader gave in, or perhaps it was a ruse—he recoiled slightly under pressure, but immediately afterwards recovered, reared up on his haunches and lashed out with a broad, splayed-out hoof. The young one, thrushing his whole carcase at him and, it must be already in great pain, clumsily rolled on to his side so as not to have his stomach gashed open. The hoof left two scars on the bristling hide. As he fell, like a horse fighting off wolves, he kicked the attacking leader with his hind-hooves in the belly. Maddened, both got up and, separating in a series of great bounds, they described a figure-of-eight, meeting in the same place again. Again they clashed forehead to forehead, went on a second round, and then a third, as if it were a dance and not a battle. Suddenly, the sharp antlers of the young one stabbed resiliently through the thick, wide-spreading branches of the old one, and both, still pushing forward against one another out of momentum, but already in terrible pain, bounded back, tearing their heads apart. Each might have

been ready to submit, but they could not break free because of their locked horns.

Realising that the reindeer could not disengage and that this was a battle to the death, Basov involuntarily threw up his hand. Gatilin guessed too.

"It's time..." he said, and, so as not to hear the glassy grinding of the horns and in order to put an immediate stop to the agonising pain suffusing the whites of the animals' eyes, he began slowly taking aim at them with his carbine.

Ashamed and shamefully still hoping for something, Basov touched his shoulder.

"Wait a bit, Viktor Sergeyevich..."

Gatilin grimaced. "Greenhorn!.." he thought contemptuously. But what was going on there? It was as if the battle wasn't over... Or were the beasts having hysterics too?

Realising the hopelessness of the situation and, perhaps, solely out of the desire to assuage his pain for a moment, the leader drew up his knee and, with a bellow wrenched from the very depths of his being, he fell down, dragging his rival with him. Falling on to their sides, they began turning their heads over, and the antlers unlocked of their own accord. No sooner had the leader realised this than the young male sprang to his feet and viciously jabbed his left hoof into the other's quivering, whitish mane. His rival made a convulsive move, but it was too late—the hoof had cut into his hide. Then, beaten, he began humbly flattening and dragging his snorting muzzle over the hoof-churned ground. The massive head with its big branchy horns, as if of its own accord, became defenceless against the blow of the right hoof, but this was not a plea for mercy—the silent, mournful gesture was an admission to the victor... And the new leader passed his other hoof over the head of his victim with excessive slowness and calmly pushed it into the bristling

mane of the old leader. Throwing back his antlers, he hailed the world with an uneven but triumphant bellow, and his victory cry travelled far, so that the females waiting in the birch-wood behind the hill trembled. And the tensely reverberating air spread out in resilient waves over the hills and the silent tundra.

He had triumphed! But he was generous. By the eternal law of chivalric duels, he spared his rival's life. And he had no fear of the future. Though, who knows, perhaps next autumn, this or another reindeer would sing his own victory song over him.

And the hunters? They should have fired! Basov had not even raised his carbine. Because of the victor? But he also felt sorry for the proud old reindeer, who got to his feet with difficulty and wandered off down the slope, his hump nose bowed, like an offended cow driven away from an unfriendly herd.

Dissatisfied with Basov, Gatilin snorted and levelled his sights. "He's a sure target!" he thought with a nasty hint of triumph, hoping to compensate for the annoyance of defeat with a successful shot. "It's a good thing Basov and I didn't have a bet or I'd have lost..." So he thought, unaware that his hands were shaking. His eye finally found the notch of the sights.

When Gatilin squeezed the trigger, a dry gunshot stabbed the air and the bullet (why had he aimed at the head and not the heart?) ricochetted off the antlers. At that moment, as if dislodged by the echo that shook the air, a ball of snow fell from the birch-tree as the victorious reindeer passed underneath it. It landed on the young male's ear. The animal bristled and rushed at a gallop over the glade, tossing and shaking his horns while an eerie bellow rolled out of his throat.

Vantulyaku appeared on the fringe of the wood

opposite Basov. He waved his hands and forced his way through the bushes on to the glade.

"Shoot, however, shoot!.." he shouted in fright. "He'll get away—very bad... Shoot!.."

He could not claim someone else's quarry. The honour of a Nganasani did not allow him to take over the right to shoot. But this was not the real cause of his alarm. Vantulyaku would have fired straightaway; the maddened reindeer, however, did not take the victor's path where the old Nganasani was waiting for him, but bounded past Basov. *Lyosa* Basov should have got him, but he merely dropped his jaw like a stupid *tugut*.

"Why? What's the point..." Basov looked shamefacedly at the furious Nganasani. "Let him live, he's still young."

"Ai-ai-ai!" Vantulyaku blinked offendedly and let his hands fall to his sides. "Very bad, however, altogether very bad. It will be no good!"

And he watched as the victor went away, frantically shaking his head and zigzagging erratically.

"What's the matter with him?"

"Young reindeer will die, and so brave," said Vantulyaku in distress, and he shook his head. "Him die soon. Filthy stoat jump on him... Gnaw brains out and leave him... However, you should have killed... Paff-paff! You should have fired..." And he was silent. What was the point of saying anything? Useless!

Burning with shame at his miss and hearing Vantulyaku's reproaches, Gatilin cheered up a little. So he wasn't the only one out of luck! And his eyes glittered with fanatic glee: Basov's reindeer had been young, and the winner, but he was the loser. He was going to die! Perhaps he had missed on purpose... His own reindeer had escaped the bullet and the forest cat, which meant that he was now not the victor, but still...

"Now what?" asked Nikita dully.

"However, maybe," replied Vantulyaku uncertainly, "if he run to lake and jump head high in water, then stoat leave him..."

"What lake?" Gatilin jeered at the suggestion. "It's solid ice all over!"

But neither Vantulyaku nor Basov, who were looking hopefully at one another, told him that hot springs beat under Bare Mountain... Moreover, in the tundra it is not done to cross the path of success with empty words.

...And now, as if reliving that hunt, Gatilin, still contemplating himself in the mirror and seeming to penetrate to the hidden connection of things, felt joyful at what had been experienced and, returning from memory with that excitedly joyous feeling, he turned on the cold water and doused his head under the powerful jet. When he looked at them again in the mirror, the clean-shaven cheeks and the broad flexible mobile chin did not seem quite so flabby any more. He was all right, and what was that Varya had said on the subject? Blow Varya! Her words were merely a minor irritation, explicable and understandable because she was a woman. The hunt was another matter!

...One glance at her husband was enough for Varya to guess what he was thinking about.

She could not have chosen a better time for the conversation. She stood up straight, then thrust the tightly packed suitcases under the bed. Her eyes were shining.

"Viktor!" she said, certain this time he would not object. "You are going to block the Aniva!"

"That'll be no problem," he laughed. "Simply a matter of the coat, then the hat." As he spoke, he pulled on the bonnet with a pom-pom that Varya had knitted for him and buttoned up his coat. "We'll block it! As our people say, 'It's a piece of cake'."

"It'll be the beginning of a new stage in our

lives," she added dreamily. "You'll get..."

She went up and put her hand meaningfully on his chest, but did not finish what she was saying because Gatilin had understood and mockingly interrupted her.

"Were those data dearly paid for?"

"You're intolerable," she said, with assumed hurt and severity in her voice. "Incorrigible. The first thing to do is block the river, then all the rest..."

Gatilin pulled himself together; he wanted to embrace her in farewell and sigh, "Where were you before, Varya? Not just yesterday, but several years ago..." But he stifled the impulse, realising that he had no right to make such a confession, as it would be a weakness.

"I'll come for the beginning," she called after him when he was already on the stairs. "Bear that in mind, you understand?"

I understand everything, Varya, everything... Meaningful sympathy, pleasant in words and almost useless in fact. Whom did it bind, and to what? Everything will be as it will be!

Soon after Gatilin had left the flat, the telephone rang. Varya picked up the receiver. It was Skvarsky, fairly pleasant and brisk; he had met Varya on the day of her arrival and had explained to her in great detail about the situation that had developed. He was not lacking in intelligence and he had shown his faith in Gatilin by following him from Karadag. "Yuri Borisovich," Varya had said then with playful reproach in her voice, "how could you, with all your power over public opinion, let Gatilin with his experience, knowledge and..."—"somehow be pushed out of the way"—was what she had wanted to say, but she had hesitated, giving Skvarsky the chance to guess for himself, and Skvarsky resourcefully had filled in the gap: "It must be put right!.." Varya, of course, had given him to understand that she could

appreciate loyalty.

She now asked him:

"What's happened, Yuri Borisovich?.. D'you want to talk to Gatilin?"

"I'd better talk to you for the time being, Varvara Timofeyevna!.. Nothing has happened really, but circumstances can change in our favour. In a word, your husband must be ready for anything..."

"Isn't he ready, then?" she asked in naive astonishment and added peremptorily: "What's likely to happen there, Yuri Borisovich? Do you wish to be sure of support?"

"Varvara Timofeyevna..." Skvarsky signed offendedly into the receiver, but to Varya he seemed condescending. "I can't tell you everything. But we don't disagree over what matters. As for judging circumstances in the heat of the moment ... who will be so bold in the age of relativity?"

"In the age of circumspection!" laughed Varya. "I don't understand you at all, Yuri Borisovich..."

She understood perfectly well that Skvarsky was seeking support, but even Yuri Borisovich became convinced once again of this woman's intuition.

"Psychological preparedness is vital here," he continued. "When you're playing King against the Ace, you will think a hundred times what to do with the Queen. Believe me," he stressed meaningfully, "anything can happen... In general, I wanted to tell you this..."

Varya thought that she was not risking anything in the final analysis. What Skvarsky was asking about had already been done, and if he would help her more, it meant that fate itself was meeting them halfway. What was there to be shy of?

"Yuri Borisovich," she said lowering her voice, "for my part, I promise. But you must promise too..." Then she resumed talking in her normal voice, making it clear that the conversation was

over. "I hope we shall see one another when they block the river; we'll finish our conversation there..."

Not very satisfied with herself, she put the receiver down. The envious feeling that a Skvarsky could now do more for Gatilin than she could, brought an offended smile to her face. "Rubbish!" she thought. "No one can do more for Gatilin than he can do for himself..."

IX

After Dasha Malysheva and Anya Odarchenko left the editorial office, Skvarsky did not lose his self-possession. They were still in the doorway and he was already sizing up the consequences of this meeting. Malyshev's shade evoked unpleasant associations, but this time he was not frightened by the old man. Odarchenko was far more dangerous. That one would sniff everything out and run straight to Basov. It could come to the surface that he, Skvarsky, had put the idea into Ivanetsky's head, passing off Malyshev's bridge project as his own.

An unpleasant chill was crawling up to his shoulder-blades. He felt shaky and uneasy in his comfortable old chair; and he did not know what to do with his hands. Yuri Borisovich did not immediately notice that he was aimlessly shuttling the proofs on the table and was ceaselessly drumming his fingers on the polished table-top. Beads of perspiration broke out on his neck and forehead.

Skvarsky rose hastily, pulled the curtain across the window, took out his handkerchief—it would have looked more suitable round some woman's neck—and, unfolding the crumpled and much-used cotton, damped his head and wiped it dry.

"There are people"—he remembered Khotyev's words—"who have been predestined

by fate itself to fulfil the role of supporting characters in life. They sometimes have ambitions to achieve more but, alas, their character does not allow them to do so."

This had been said at a moment of crisis and not to himself alone, but in the presence of the pupil whose thesis had been turned down. In spite of his failure, Skvarsky did not take it personally—the teacher's reproach would have been too cruel if he had—but, strangely, time passed and Khoteyev's sarcastically biting conclusion had not been forgotten. Was not that because the maestro had detected a hidden flaw, and therefore Khoteyev had been kind to him and kept him close at hand?

If that was so, then the maestro was surely mistaken! After many troubles, Skvarsky had become used to observing life with a cold, bored indifference, partly even with contempt: "A film show!.." He rarely met people worthy of his respect, and in this sense the Barakhsanites were no exception. He tolerated them and smiled at them, remaining convinced that he could see what was below the surface. The "heroes of harsh mundane realities" were coming here for money and for glory. But the overwhelming majority were, in Skvarsky's opinion, "a stage lower", people who had sunk to the level of romanticism, ready to let themselves fall prey to bloodsuckers on the assumption that their sufferings and sacrifices would elevate them to the ideals of good, humanism and enlightenment... These people were utterly devoid of practical flair, as if each of them had more than one life ahead. He respected individuality, but only when the individuality was in the man. Basov, for instance, he respected, but the others were froth on the surface, even although the North was nevertheless gradually teaching them to gain their due from life...

Yes, Basov was no fool, but he caused irritation

with his self-assurance, his success and, above all, the narrowness of his interests. He did not understand, and did not want to understand, the breadths and complexities of life, the many different trends. He was as straight as a nail and as unbending—perhaps the only person in Barakhsan with whom all compromise was ruled out. To put it more precisely, he himself ruled it out. Compared with him, Alimushkin was easy-going and feckless. Naively honest. And if Alimushkin had a wife, he would account to her for every box of matches. Strange that he should get on with Basov, who loved initiatives not envisaged by the directives, whereas such things cut Alimushkin to the quick. Oh, if Skvarsky only had the time at his disposal, he would try to get them at loggerheads, playing on the Party Organiser's principles. But one thing was vital: dislodge Basov, put Gatilin on the river-closing operation, and then Gatilin (his soul would respond to the Karadag past; no one apart from Skvarsky had come here after him—in vain, or what?); let him reproach, but he would not let Skvarsky be thrown to the lions!..

And so, going over all the Barakhsan people in his mind, Skvarsky came to Basov's wife Elena. He immediately remembered how she had sniffed at their first meeting, and, without a thought of taking offence, he had chosen a different tactic... On meeting Elena he would significantly, now in joyous surprise, now condescendingly, say the same thing every time:

"A-a-ah!.. Elena Ilyinichna and ... Anna Fyodorovna!"

This was particularly effective at meetings when he got up from his chair, nodding at Elena, then turning around and running his eyes over the rows of seats as if trying to find Odarchenko, even if she was sitting next to him.

After this had happened more than once, it was impossible not to realise that Skvarsky, in jest or

in earnest, was putting both women into a kind of contact. Elena began to feel edgy. She would turn pale, blush, be cross. She tried everything. She would pretend not to notice Skvarsky or would be the first to rush and greet him, but nothing helped!..

But she wasn't the main target, Odarchenko was easy-going to look at, but untouchable... Many men had tried to get off with her, but had been turned down. And each of them would freely admit that someone else, Basov, for instance ... had succeeded where he had failed. Incredible! If any of the women had whispered this in Elena's ear and had shaken her up a bit, there was still no knowing whether Basov would succeed in restoring his good name!..

Skvarsky thought fleetingly of Shura Pochivalina, with whom he was on close terms, but with whom he had quarrelled and parted recently and, as he hoped, for good. That one could get her way with anyone, as he well knew. But there was no way of approaching her; he would have to think of something else...

Even before Elena's arrival in Barakhsan, Basov and Anya Odarchenko had shot the Rapids together on a raft. They had, so to speak, tamed the Aniva. And they had spent the night before that in the forest. Had someone tamed somebody there too?

Skvarsky squirmed in his chair and scratched his arms. There was something symbolic about that incident. It could be said, he reasoned, that tomorrow Basov and that same Odarchenko would throw down a second challenge to the Aniva... Why should he, as an editor, not tell the readers about this? Somewhere between the lines he could drop a hint about the lyrical intimacy between the characters—would that really be too little, especially for Elena? Let her grow up a bit for the good of her soul... Let her defend her honour and

Basov's position, and this time, if Shurochka did a bit of gossiping too, another opinion would form...

Now then—and Skvarsky prepared a pad of fresh paper—your turn to speak, Comrade Alimushkin! Who is Basov to you? The hero of the day, the hero of the river-closing operation. Yes, to you and the people. But as for the people, just listen to what they're saying: the hero's a womaniser, excuse the coarse language!.. Still, he's setting a good example? And how d'you reconcile this with your principles, Comrade Alimushkin? Wouldn't it be better to revise the Party Committee's resolution? Skvarsky grinned. It would be even better if Gatilin could take over the initiative!

Hope had dawned: an overthrown Basov would hold no terrors, Gatilin was a mountain, and with him Skvarsky would come to no harm... The telephone conversation with Gatilin's wife had convinced Skvarsky that it was worth the risk. Even if something was rotten in the state of Denmark, Gatilin would clutch at any pretext to push Basov out of the way; he, Skvarsky, had nothing to lose. And not for nothing, as it turned out, was Alimushkin accustoming the people to the idea that the river-closing operation was not only a production act, but was also of spiritual significance. Here, immorality must play against a background of morality! All it needed was to create the obviousness which would not demand examination...

Skvarsky had finished his reflections; now he must write, immediately, and send the result to press! What page were they doing now? Inside or out?

Painstakingly holding his stomach to stop it wobbling (it was as round as an egg), Skvarsky rushed into the print shop. The girl printer noticed him when he was still in the corridor waving his arms. She warned the linotype operator with

displeasure:

"It's Potbelly again... He may drop dead, I'm not going to reset this side."

"Let him run his own proofs off," laughed the other, "or we won't get out before lunch..."

"Stop, stop, stop!" shouted Skvarsky, running breathlessly up to the machine.

"Now what?"

The red-headed girl, knowing that she was the only printer for the whole of Barakhsan, was methodically laying news-sheets on the drum. An inside double-page spread was being printed. She had already dealt with the outside.

"The issue's been signed for, no more room," she said peremptorily to Skvarsky. "You should have caught your slips earlier..."

She switched off the motor, calmly climbed down from the platform, stretched herself and yawned. Then she looked into her pocket mirror.

"Do it yourself, Yuri Borisovich. I've worked my hours," she said, ignoring Skvarsky's babblings. "I've got to get some sleep now, it's a holiday in the morning and a festival, and I..." she yawned again.

Skvarsky fell silent. Bending over the type in the machine, he wheezed angrily as he studied the column and pretended not to have heard her. Let her rave. The photograph in the corner must be moved with the drawing under it, and the copy must be set up in three columns—it would just fit into that window. And it would look marvellous—up to ninety lines.

He straightened up to give the order.

The printer was standing in the door with her hat and coat on and holding her handbag.

"D'you understand what this is called?" he asked sternly. "You'll ruin the issue... Sabotage!"

"And who the boss!" she sighed. "No respect for the working woman! It's no use threatening... I'm off. See you!"

"But I ... I ... please!"

She demurred.

"Will you write a chit for overtime!"

"I'll give you time off!"

"I'm legally entitled to that anyway... No? As you know..."

"She'll go, the red-headed bitch!" thought Skvarsky, and he tore a sheet off the newspaper roll and began writing.

"Include him too!" the girl nodded at the linotype operator, a quiet lad just out of the army.

"I..." he began, but Skvarsky put his name in.

"What sort of people are they?" he thought bitterly on the way back to his office. "Stubborn as mules, wangle everything to suit themselves, can't say a thing to them. If that kind want, they'll block a river with their bare hands, otherwise you can't force them, even with overtime money... Strange how brazenly she was talking. Name of Chukharkina or Churkina, or something... It's the same everywhere, all through life: they interfere, instruct, distract you with petty trifles, won't let you concentrate... No, must find another printer, another one, and give this one a lesson! Let her clear off, let her mix concrete..."

Mastering the tremor in his hands and to win time, which was running out every moment, Skvarsky rang Ivanetsky. He was either very drunk or bad-tempered at being woken up.

"I need you! I'll expect you here in forty-five minutes! Business... Urgent, and important to you..."

Ivanetsky was going to refuse, but Skvarsky reminded him sharply:

"I'm working on your authority, though you're a puppy to me, understand?"

Ivanetsky babbled something, but Skvarsky was not listening any more. He'd come, and he'd come running. And it wasn't a big job—just to carry a fresh off-print to the Met Station before Elena got

there. Yes! It must be before!.. The sooner she found out the better. Without giving another thought to anything else, he sat down to his article. Two paragraphs and off to the linotype with it! While the ex-soldier was casting them, he'd write the next two...

He had the ability to write fast, with concentration. Now, it was true, there was no time for subtleties of style; he mustn't hold up the issue, and the proofs had to be run off, corrected, then sent to press... And Skvarsky was in a hurry. He got the beginning done without any corrections—the rough draft was O. K. (he knew himself!); he simply placed a few stresses here and there. He emphasised that Nikita and Anya had ridden on the raft together, that they had spent the night alone in the forest, the decision to shoot the Rapids had occurred to them by morning and the risk had been a calculated one... The rest was nothing. And so that the writer would not seem spiteful, naturally, he would omit the proper names and leave only the initials; this would add a positive note so that it would be very easy to avoid any reproaches. Appreciate humour, my friends!.. But already anticipating the impression that would be made on Elena, he surrendered himself to the passion raging within him and with increasing frequency he crossed out what he had written and hunted for new words; the hints became more barbed, and the countless dots were intended to tell the reader more than he could allow himself with plain text.

Seldom had Skvarsky been in such a state of excitement. If something displeased him, he threw himself back in his chair with an angry snort, squirmed impatiently and shuffled his small feet under the table, and everything that tormented and consumed him at that moment tore him apart and distorted his face until he found the right word at last... This was no longer the man who, an hour or

two ago, had been benevolence itself to the visitor from the capital. He had been exuding so much aplomb, fervour and complacency then, but now he would have begrudged her even a savage glance...

The job was finally done. The off-print was made.

And Ivanetsky, without a word of protest, had already slipped away on his errand. There was still Shura Pochivalina. He wouldn't get her with an idea or intimidation. She was an old hand. After that silly quarrel with her, he would have to feign sincerity and play the part of the repentant sinner. Sinners command more faith, for some reason, than decent people. And she would be fluttered anyway. "So you came of your own free will..."

Shura was busy in the canteen till late, preparing the celebration dinner for the next day. She was feeling tired, but for her it was a pleasant tiredness.

On returning home, she tidied up her flat, had a bath and did the usual chores, but she was haunted by a vague uneasiness, perhaps, a sense of alarm, and she seemed dissatisfied with herself—something was not quite right—she was actually hiding it from herself and was afraid that Skvarsky might come. Hadn't she already been too quick to show him the door? If you think about it, then he's all right, she thought; he would be tolerable if he didn't keep frightening her with talk of not marrying her—now we'll separate, now I'll drop you... Legal ones also get left. And you can't keep a dog on a chain, much less with a piece of paper that's got a stamp on it. The whole trouble was that she had no other suitable man but Skvarsky, and so that's why she held on to him, but...

Her sleep was fitful and birdlike; she kept dreaming about something, waking up, and then it seemed that the clock had stopped, so she moved

it from the window-sill to the bedside cabinet. As soon as she closed her eyes, there was a different noise; someone was scratching at the door like a cat... That was the way he used to visit her the first few times, asking her permission to come in, only he would scratch the window, and then she had given him the key. More scratching, more insistent, with a rap on the panel. The door was not locked. Shura hastily pushed her hands into the gaps in her sarafan. Skvarsky came in cautiously. His hat was on one side, his coat was flying open, and he was carrying a bundle of papers tied with string. He looked haggard, his face was darker, or did it only seem so because she was still half-asleep?..

"Shura!" his jaw jerked and Shura thought she might do better not to let him in. "I've come..."

She was standing sideways on to him and stooped slightly, tugging up her sarafan. Her sloping shoulders and the graceful, supply bent back embarrassed Skvarsky. He thought with regret that she didn't know her own worth. A body like hers was meant for love and caresses, and it would be a shame if she turned stubborn again.

"Come in, since you're here," said Shura. "Don't stand there like a tree-stump."

"You don't trust me," he sighed, and, wiping his forehead, he thrust the russet cap with the short peak on to the back of his head. "I've even brought my papers. I thought I'd leave them here for good..."

Shura shrugged her shoulders. She was gripping a hairpin in her teeth while she tidied her hair, and she didn't want to talk. She was waiting to see what would happen next. Interpreting her silence in his own way, Skvarsky glanced searchingly round the room and threw the files on top of the sideboard, as near to the wall as possible.

"Off to work already?" he asked immediately afterwards.

"As you see..." She opened a bottle of scent, sniffed, and, forgetting to perfume herself, put it back on the shelf again.

"Shura..." and he sat down, slipping his coat back on to his shoulder-blades but not taking it off, "we must have a talk... I've been thinking a lot..."

"Since yesterday?"

She continued getting ready, taking no notice of him, and he was annoyed that she was not listening or was pretending not to. He moved another chair from behind the table.

"Sit down!" he ordered masterfully.

"We'll talk on the way there. I'm in a hurry!"

"Can't you see," drily, offendedly said he, "that I'm not myself..."

"When are you yourself?" she was going to ask, but restrained herself and said knowingly:

"A-a-ha..."

His coat had finally slipped off and was only held up by the sleeves. Shura, who habitually tidied up before going out, casually pulled it back on to Skvarsky by the collar, as if pushing him into a sack.

"Perhaps I should leave here and go somewhere else," he said impartially. "And you?"

"Wherever the devil takes me!?" However, this new development had caught her interest. "D'you aim to go far?"

"No... Basov's messed me up," he said, as if completely distraught. "I'll have to go somewhere else."

"He's messed you up, and you're ready to go in a hurry. Something fishy about your story." Shura didn't believe him. "Or have you cooked this one up?"

"Huh!" sneered Skvarsky bitterly at Shura's naivety. He held his hands in front of him,

pressed his finger-tips together and sighed noisily. "I was indiscreet enough to comment that his flirtation with Anya Odarchenko was too obvious... In general, I gave him a friendly warning... And the result? As a result, he blackballed me. I was the one that was seducing people, he said. He dragged in printshop girls, cooks and a nurse. You understand, when people talk like that, it's useless even trying to defend yourself. So I..."

He didn't finish. It ought to be obvious. He watched Shura. He'd caught her on the raw; there were red patches on her cheeks.

"Basov's not like that," she said, as if talking to herself. "Nor is Anya..."

Shura was still thinking, trying to make sense of what she had heard. With an obvious effort, Skvarsky raised his eyebrows and gave her a long look.

"Of course, of course," he said hastily, agreeing with her objections. "Serves me right for poking my nose into other people's affairs... But you know, after that scene I nearly made another bloomer. I thought I'd go to his wife and tell her everything. If she couldn't knock some sense into him, there was no point in my being here. And then... She wouldn't understand, she would refuse to believe me."

Shura said nothing to him in reply, bowed her shoulders and went to the window. She moved the edge of the curtain aside and she could feel the sobs rising to her throat. She bit her lips, but could not restrain herself and buried her face in the curtain. It was true, everything was going wrong... She had thrown him out, she had thought it was over, and it was as if he had nowhere to put himself... And who would advise her? She might be rejecting her man for the rest of her life!.. "Tell me my fortune, gypsy, for sorrow gnaws my heart!" She remembered how he had first started talking to her, beautifully, solemnly, as if in the

cinema... Those who were from the cinema had long been sorted out; but he was simply a failure, had wanted to fly higher than the sun but couldn't, and that's why he was nasty and two-faced, didn't look on all people as human, and was now ready to crawl at her feet. Men were fools nowadays, each was looking for a sweet with a nice crinkly wrapping, but as soon as they bit what was inside, they felt sick. But if Skvarsky was serious, dead serious, then she would find a way of restoring his good name...

She felt for her hankie, wiped her eyes and in a voice that sounded alien to her, said to him:

"I'm not throwing you out... Stay, and we'll see..."

He bowed his head guiltily.

"Stay here, don't poke your nose in anywhere," she continued more confidently. "I'll talk to the necessary people myself. A man mustn't have his life ruined because of some gossip."

"Don't, don't do anything!" he blurted out. "You won't help by talking, and it can't be any worse now than it already is."

"If you were mine," she said bitterly, "I'd tear any other woman's hair out!.. But don't be afraid, I'm not going to force you to stay. Here's the truth: they won't do anything to you because of me. And I might say that there weren't any others, and you're free to go wherever you want..."

"No, don't go to anybody. That includes Elena... I couldn't make up my mind to see her myself, so I advise you to do so even less. There's no fathoming you women, of course, but she has character, a finer one than Basov. Just say the wrong word, and she'll have the whole settlement up in arms..."

"Not if I handle it," promised Shura glumly. "Perhaps I shan't go to her after all, what made you think so?"

"But I thought... Well, of course, you've made

the right decision!" he concluded with frank regret and, feeling that he was getting no response from her, asked, "Should I see you to work?"

She was ready; she pushed her feet into her shoes, fastened up the fluffy scarf round her neck and said:

"You've got the keys... So get some sleep!"

"Lord!.." sighed Shura inwardly. "Drop in and have a chat with Elena, what could be simpler? Women squabbling over men!.. But we don't want to divide them this time, we've got to reconcile two fools. I shan't even say a word about Anya Odarchenko, and anyway, it's gossip, it just can't be true..."

Shura walked quickly, shivering slightly in the fresh morning breeze. The street was deserted, as on a day off. Suddenly, she thought she heard footsteps behind her. She looked round, but there was nobody there. In the morning, of course, everybody would leave for the river site, would get frozen there, and would then head for the cafeteria. She would have to rush round with the girls—it was virtually a law: when people aren't working, they always eat more... Shura quickened her pace. She was trying not to think about Skvarsky. He had her completely flummoxed. Should she go to Elena, say a couple of words to her, and perhaps have a chat with Basov? Basov respected her, always said, "How d'you do?" and shook hands with her. Skvarsky had been discouraging her, and so artfully that she now felt she absolutely must call... That was clever of him. He'd get her to call on the Basovs... Let's assume there was something going on between them... She'd stage a scandal... Shura, Shura, whatever are you thinking of?

Somebody was dogging her heels! She turned her head quickly and saw a shadow dodge behind the buildings... It was him. He hadn't held out, which meant he had come on to trail her. It must be

absolutely vital to him that she should call, as if of her own free will, but that he should have nothing to do with it.

Shura swallowed the insult and stood opposite Basov's house for a little while, but Skvarsky did not show himself, but was hiding somewhere. Then she turned into the entrance. She went up the staircase listening, until she heard frozen sand crunching under cautious footsteps. She ran down, pushed the door open with her shoulder and lost her composure when she saw Skvarsky hiding his face with his hand, either afraid of being recognised or in self-defence. Oh, he was just shading his eyes against the light falling on his face from the open door.

"It wasn't enough for you to send me, now you have to spy on me..." said Shura quietly and with regret, as if justifying herself to him. Skvarsky held out his hands supplicatingly to calm her.

"Well, what about it, did you tell her? How did she take it? What did she say?" he asked eagerly.

Shura realised that he had deliberately played on her sympathies and falsified everything to her, and it was probably not Basov who was sick of him, but he who was sick of Basov. And he had thrown her like a bone to dogs. This thought cut Shura to the quick, her heart missed a beat, and, realising that it would be better to deceive Skvarsky, she screamed almost hysterically:

"Satisfied, yes? Happy? You're safe, and Shura gets thrown on the junk-heap, eh? That's all you deserve!.. She threw a can of paraffin at me! Here, smell that?" And Shura fiercely pushed the hem of her old coat under his nose; it indeed smelt of what seemed like paraffin.

"Quiet, Shura, quiet!.." He looked round him.

"Get out of my sight, you devil!.." she groaned.

"It had to be. It's that sort of situation!.. Be calm and go to work, I'll explain later..." Holding

up his hat with one hand, then with the other, he went round the corner.

Keeping her head close to the stone wall, shattered, Shura thought with indifference that he had crawled away like a snake and wriggled back into his hole to lie low... But it was unfair, it wouldn't do! This was no way to live. "The past is past, at least take care of the present, girl!" she thought to herself. She walked past the Post Office and the hotel, heading for Alimushkin's house. She knew that it was not a sense of injury or malice that was taking her there; she must act for the sake of the truth, which is the sole human truth on Earth. Once you bury it, you'll never get out of the pit again for the rest of your life...

After Dasha's phone-call, Alimushkin got a move on and hurried home from the office van. Day was breaking. A gloomy light was flooding over the tundra. The hills on the horizon made a black ridge—clouds were lingering over there in the morning hush, and the day promised to be overcast and cold.

Alimushkin was thinking about Dasha and could not rid his mind of Borodulin and his rock. To admit that Borodulin had sent the whole collective to blazes meant that Alimushkin must shoulder part of the blame. The customary chain was forming in his mind of its own accord—whom to reprimand, whom to warn, against whom to take action—the chain was getting longer, like the bellows of an accordion; everything depended on how it was played, and this was an accordionist's job. And he thought now, not of one, but of many Borodulins: individualistic actions were more often associated with danger, and so every kind of self-assertion was inadmissible. Yes, they had apparently not finished the educational work, otherwise they wouldn't have lived to see such individualism...

When he went inside, Dasha was sitting on the bench in front of the door. She stood up, and, without asking any questions, Alimushkin embraced her. She suddenly burst into tears, and he began stroking her shoulder and her head, unable to calm her... He had a lump in his throat, and to some reason he was trying to hide it, but failed, and kissed her temple, her neck and, unable to tell what her hair smelt of, thought it must he violets. This was just the kind of meeting he had imagined, and he whispered, "Dasha, my dear!" and lifted her face up to his own with his hands. She smiled through her tears, but at that moment the doorbell rang abruptly.

Alimushkin sighed apologetically and looked at Dasha: "I'm sorry, I don't know who it is..."

"All right, come in! The door's not locked..." he said.

A young woman walked in; she was small, her face was familiar but he had forgotten her name. She was tense with irritation, ill-concealed behind the dry, pouted lips and the flushed cheeks.

"I'm sorry," she said in an unnaturally loud voice, "intruding at such an awkward time."

"Come in," invited Dasha.

She was not put out by the visitor's scrutiny; she understood that it must have seemed strange—Alimushkin with a woman in his flat.

Alimushkin introduced Dasha somewhat shyly: "This is my..."

"...wife," concluded Dasha, and she smiled. She gave her own name and the visitor's excessive interest immediately waned.

"You don't remember me, Pyotr Evseyevich... My name's Churkina..."

"Alevtina Pavlovna?" he remembered. "Don't you work for us as a printer? It took long enough to persuade you... You used to be a concrete layer under Kapustina. 'The best team', he added, mimicking her. 'I'll never leave it...' Am I right?"

"Yes!" Her face lit up with pleasure at Alimushkin's remembering it, but she promptly changed her tune and sounded hurt:

"A fine job you pushed me into! Blow it!.. And with that Skvarsky of yours... He makes a mess of his articles, he's worn me out with his changes... I'll go, just mark my words, I'm tough, but this I won't take."

"What's happened?" asked Alimushkin, amused at her show of temper.

"Oh, I didn't mean it all that," she laughed appeasingly. "I'm used to shouting, it's noisy in the print shop. But this is what's happened..."

She took out of her inside pocket a fresh issue of *The Aniva Dam Builder* still smelling of printer's ink.

"Perhaps I'm worrying about nothing," she said opening the paper, "but I've still got a conscience... Anna Fyodorovna means nothing to me, nor I to her, and all the girls on the project like Nikita Leontievich, but that's no reason to black his name..."

They went into the kitchen. Alimushkin sat down at the table and Churkina took a seat opposite him. She declined to take her things off, but accepted a glass of tea from Dasha. She drank carefully and never taking her eyes off Alimushkin. Bending over beside, Dasha was also reading. She blushed, and when Alimushkin turned to her, she said:

"I had the proofs of this column in my hand, but this item wasn't there..."

"No, it wasn't," confirmed Churkina.

Alimushkin and Dasha both looked at her enquiringly and she gravely pushed back her tea-glass.

"That's the whole thing—it wasn't there," she repeated with her former severity and looked at Dasha with particular interest. "So you're the one who came to see us with Anya?.. Well, well!

Would you be daughter of Malyshev the academician in Moscow?"

"Yes..."

"You've salted our Skvarsky's tail. But we've heard about your father on the project. Send him greetings—from all of us, and from Churkina. So you and Pyotr Evseyevich are legally married?"

"Yes, that's it," he shrugged his shoulders impatiently. "How this could come out? Did you print it, then?" Casually and contemptuously, he picked up the paper. "Did you print it!"

"I did," smiled Churkina, knowing that she was not to blame, and she explained: "What could I do? It was an order. Here—" and she took out a piece of rolled-up paper. "That's his order for new proofs, so I printed them. Overtime... When you left"—she looked at Dasha—"he was furious. The edition was already signed for the press, but he stopped it. He sat down and took it line by line to the linotypist. We couldn't make head or tail of it. He gave the orders and we churned them out..."

"The whole edition?"

"The whole one, what else?"

"You could have phoned me... Would it have been that difficult?"

"But d'you know what I was thinking? It was for the river-closing operation. I only looked afterwards and my eyes nearly popped out of my head. Or I'm a fool... The linotypist kept mum and I said, 'Why didn't you say something?' And he just fluttered his eyelashes: 'I was given it...'"

"Where's the paper now?" asked Alimushkin.

"Where?.. I lugged it off to the post office, that's where! And went to you... I thought, it's disgraceful to say things like that about people, it's bad. People here may flirt with each another, still no one talks like that about them; but this is sheer muck-raking. And what's he on about it for? The Rapids! They shot the Rapids, everybody knows about it and nobody's been saying any-

thing. But he tells the story as if he was making a bed... I'm leaving, Pyotr Evseyevich, I refuse to work! Bringing such shame on myself!.."

Alimushkin pushed the paper away and stood up.

"We'll put things right there, Churkina, we'll put them right... You did well to come. We'll hold up the paper, and I want to ask you, Alevtina..."

"My mouth's locked, I've left the key with you," continued Churkina, anticipating his next words. "I collected up all the papers except one copy and counted them, but he shoved an offprint into his pocket, the first, the one I couldn't find..."

"One copy won't make the weather," said Alimushkin, thinking of something else and, collecting himself, he smiled helplessly at Dasha, as if asking if she understood.

She merely asked if he was going to the Post Office.

The newspapers had not yet been sorted and Alimushkin picked up both parcels and took them away to the Party Committee. He instructed the Post Office girls that if anyone enquired, they were to say that as far as they knew, they were being delivered... The subscribers were unlikely to start complaining today—he had warned them just in case in order to throw Skvarsky off the scent. The note was vulgar and nasty, but the fact was that Skvarsky had decided to smear Basov just before the river-blocking operation. Alimushkin knew the reason; but why had Skvarsky taken it on himself?

Dasha explained, telling about her nocturnal visit to Skvarsky.

He was slightly puzzled that while he was at the Post Office, another woman arrived, eyes red with weeping, as Dasha understood, and in any case upset. She was too shy to give her name and did not wait—they would meet again some other

time... However hard Alimushkin thought about it, he could not have supposed that it would be Shura Pochivalina. It was clear that she was in a hurry. Which meant that the matter was not urgent, decided Alimushkin, not forgetting Dasha's story of her meeting with Skvarsky in the editorial office...

Tall and lean, Alimushkin listened to her, walking about the room in his grey, turtle-necked camel-hair sweater. From time to time he snorted vaguely and, supporting his elbow with his hand, rubbed his already flaming cheeks with his palm. He gradually made sense of it all, pinched a green onion from the box under the window, put it on his tongue, chewed, and said less to Dasha than to himself:

"Bitter..."

"What?" asked Dasha.

He did not answer. Sooner or later, he was thinking, Skvarsky would nevertheless come out into the open. He needed Barakhsan to sit it out and wait for a time, and he must be hoping for something here... The meeting with Dasha, his fear, his momentary despair or weakness, had knocked him off his balance, he had gone haywire! And he himself had overlooked Skvarsky's nature. He had not noticed the rot... Had it not been for the newspaper and Churkina, he wouldn't have believed that anyone could be so despicable. Anyone else, even Borodulin... "At least that one's a man!" he objected inwardly.

"Everything's getting petty, Dasha," he said. "Don't you find it so? Even the nastiness..."

Dasha didn't agree.

"That's what you're saying now. But tomorrow? Imagine if the paper had gone out. Skvarsky's fired for libel... And Basov! And Anya, and Elena? And all this dirt, and the scandal?"

"Even so, Anya is the most important one to you?" Alimushkin raised his finger.

"You know," continued Dasha, "taking Basov from the river-closing operation isn't the worst thing. What's terrible is to degrade a man, throw dirt at him, trample on his honour and dignity. And it's all calculated to do just that. What to say after that: he's right, he's not to blame..."

"Let's suppose it wouldn't be so easy to break Basov," disagreed Alimushkin.

"Basov? It's possible. Basov won't be broken... And what's Basov, if they break the morale itself..."

"Ye-e-s," Alimushkin looked at the clock. "We've gone a long way. What d'you suggest?"

"Nothing," sighed Dasha wearily. "I simply don't want to see him..."

But that "nothing" of hers sounded bitter; she did not agree with Alimushkin, and she certainly wanted him to take measures against Skvarsky immediately. However, any step, apart from the one he had already made by confiscating the newspaper, would only play into Skvarsky's hands. If Alimushkin urgently called the Party Committee, it meant he would completely ruin everybody's holiday mood. In form, he would be virtually right. And there was no doubt that after the river-closing operation, the members of the Party Commitee would point out to him that he, as secretary, had dragged things out...

"No, we'll call the Party Committee after the blocking operation," and Alimushkin said the last few words emphatically. "I can't do it now, I haven't the right. We've got to hurry now, to headquarters..." And he looked at Dasha. Had she understood him?

"Let's have tea or coffee," she replied, "then we can go to headquarters. And postpone the paper! They don't count lines with the finger but with a line measurer. And there's no reason to count. I can see what you're going to suggest to me!"

"Yes, to you!" And Alimushkin smiled guiltily. Do a re-write..."

But to himself he thought, "She's your wife, you can't hide anything." And, realising that Dasha agreed, he sighed with relief and cheered up.

X

It was morning. The headquarters van was crowded and stuffy, and the jostling, lack of air and the talk made it seem cramped, although there were no more people than usual at headquarters conferences. It was time for them all to be sitting in their places, but the festive excitement which the young commanders of the Barakhsan construction project were scrupulously and awkwardly trying to hide, inevitably violated the order and rhythm of the proceedings. The strict bosses of the services, shifts and sectors turned up in full regalia: in pressed shirts, neckties and their best suits; some, in spite of their youth, were wearing the ribbons of Orders on their chests. For the majority, however, this river-closing operation was the first. All were somewhat ceremonial and stiff; smiles were strained—this was because of inner excitement; and no matter at whom you looked, behind the seemingly expressionless manner, there was unshakeable pride. And that is an understatement! They knew their responsibility, and responsibility demands restraint; that was why they didn't notice the mutual rigidity and identically dispassionate, frozen expressions on one another's faces. But habit reasserts itself, and already there were chuckles here, jokes there, already they were coagulating into groups, sharing the latest news and anxious to find out what people in another group were saying, and they all already knew that slush ice had carried away the water-level gauge at the bridge, that the desperate Borodulin had nearly

blocked the Aniva single-handed and Silin, it was said, had helped him (Silin morosely avoided those who were laughing at him); they knew that Malyshev's daughter had come to the river-closing operation (they stared inquisitively at Dasha, who was sitting at the table beside Alimushkin), and that in the restaurant, they were outdoing themselves—a sucking pig was being roasted for each person taking part in the operation, and this, of course, was good; but in Shura Pochivalina's canteen—according to the most reliable sources—there would be beer, either Czech or Smolensk, and they sighed: it was good, perhaps, only how were they to get Shura's beer and Gatilin's piglets together?.. But they avoided discussing the main thing—it wasn't done to interrupt business with idle curiosity. They simply looked round with eager eyes: did anyone know, had anyone heard?..

Having covered the news at their leisure, they went over to international affairs—it was now possible to shout yourself hoarse if you lost patience. The hockey fans quarrelled about the Canadians—should they or should they not be allowed into "our" hockey, and Skvarsky was going to shuffle past unnoticed behind the backs of the arguers, but his caution already seemed too suspicious. Had he sniffed something out, perhaps? They hailed him.

"Steady on, Press! What's the news?"

Skvarsky stopped, aware that someone was tugging his coat from behind. He looked round—they all seemed to be friends. He pulled his coat free and barked with annoyance:

"Irresponsible people, really!"

And he was so sincerely offended (but people were irresponsible; who would dispute it?) that everybody laughed. Still grumbling, Skvarsky began making his way behind chairs into a corner of the van.

Then someone they had forgotten about turned

up—Korostylev, Basov's friend had been on duty all night. True, this one, if he knew anything, wouldn't talk anyway, but nevertheless.

"Vasily Ivanych"—carefully—"which prospect d'you prefer: a sucking pig or a glass of beer?"

"Why, is there a smell of roasting?" joked the other.

He smiled, shook hands, said something about the Northern Lights. No, he wasn't going to talk.

And again round the van, buzz-buzz-buzz—the indefatigable shuttle had started working in various modes, but nearer and nearer drew the moment for which they had assembled here, and however much the chief of operations might hide from preliminary questionings, it's already time he was here too. And the chairs grated as they were pushed back a little way, people took their seats without fuss and looked more and more frequently at the slightly open door, into the entrance-space of the carriage, where the round-shouldered figure of a worried Silin could be seen, and the haze of smoke from the cigarette in his hand floated with the cold air into the van.

The calmly intent figure of Viktor Gatilin seemed to have been sitting for some time at the long headquarters table, as if turned to stone. He was indifferent to the mundane news, but his attentive, wearily frowning eyes had missed nothing. For instance, Alimushkin was worrying about something—definitely worrying, although he was deep in conversation with Malyshev's daughter, the journalist. She smiled, but he didn't let go of the box of matches he was toying with and he would rattle them until he'd solved his own problem... Not for nothing was Korostylev edging nearer to the door. He intended to be first to get his mechanics going... "An old duffer last night," thought Gatilin without malice, "but now he's got flair and resourcefulness... Where from?" Through the carriage window, Gatilin had already noticed

Korostylev's reserve bulldozer operator, independently pacing about with a cigarette between his teeth, his hands behind his back, the little cap on his forehead pulled down, as if he were strolling along a city pavement. A stick with a furled signal-flag protruded from the leather boot-top... Why? That was the question that came to mind. To wave it as soon as Korostylev gave the signal! Wondering about the signaller, Gatilin did not hear the buzz of conversation in headquarters for a while and thought that had he the freedom to do so, he would have gladly changed places with that lad who was so naively earnest.

In headquarters, all were glancing more often and more demandingly at Gatilin himself. Why didn't the head of the project say something and open the session? Basov hadn't shown up... The jowels worked under Gatilin's smooth skin, his cheeks flushed slightly. He didn't like Basov being held up, he didn't like it when they spoke about him in his presence—gave anyone who did a sharp look, but it had no effect on Alimushkin. He was looking Gatilin in the eye, and Viktor Sergeyevich read his own surname on his lips. At this point, Dasha transferred her gaze to Gatilin, looking straight at him with interest. Evidently, he had said nothing bad... Pretending not to have noticed anything, Gatilin raised his chin slightly and surveyed the assembled company. "They all seem to be here..." But he was still thinking about Dasha. It's a good thing she wasn't pestering him with questions.

"It's time, it's time!" came the insistent, demanding voices from behind the table.

The gloomy Silin went out into the entrance again, lit a cigarette and held the door open with his foot to admit the air. Korostylev was asking him about something, and Silin's bass voice was heard:

"Sit down, no sign of him yet..."

Basov's voice was heard outside. Someone greeted him, he said something, laughed, and there he was in the doorway, composed and energetic, with no trace of a smile on his white, long-cheekboned face.

While Basov was hanging up his coat and hat, Korostylev managed to tell him in a half-whisper that Lyuba, his secretary, had gone to the hospital to find out how Borodulin was doing. Nikita nodded, and when he went up to his place at the head of the table, they could all synchronise their watches—it's a few seconds short of nine...

Basov authoritatively tapped the cap of his ball-point pen on the glass table-top in front of him and sat down.

Nine o'clock.

He had the duty log in front of him. Having taken the open pages at a glance, Nikita passed the log to Odarchenko. Anya's face could not be seen by the members of the headquarters, she was sitting half-turned away from them, but there was no hiding anything from Basov—she had red circles under her eyes. He said quietly to her in a guilty voice, but with reproach:

"Anya!"

That meant, "Stop it, that will do! I told you it's my fault." Wrinkling her nose and biting her lip, she hid behind the log to conceal her embarrassment. Peace had been restored.

All were silent, it was now possible to begin...

Basov delayed for a moment longer.

Broad-shouldered, upright, in a white shirt with a red tie (his jacket, by habit, already draped over the back of his chair), Basov threw his head back, but the dark hair fell over his eyebrows again. Calmly pushing it back, he gave his sleeves a slight tug and as if listening to what his comrades were thinking of him, weighing up the pros and cons and all the burden of the responsibility that lay on their shoulders—that, at any event, was

what Dasha assumed, noticing an unusually sharp crease round Basov's stubborn lips. With a slow, premeditated rather than casual gesture, Basov let fall his broad hands with their big, closely pressed fingers on to the glass, and they rested conspicuously there.

He uttered the first words in an ordinary voice, almost bored, with a kind of half-affirmative note:

"You have assembled for the river-closing operation as if to go into attack? It sounds fine, I admit, and attractive. Great stuff for the literary stylists. But I advise you to leave that word, and the atmosphere of an attack, to the press..."

His voice became firmer, drilling into the now tense silence.

"Get ready for serious work!" A pause. "Will the services' chiefs please report to headquarters their state of readiness for the operation?"

A sigh rustled round the van like dry leaves, but the bewilderment remained: were they or were they not going to start, or was this another rehearsal?

Basov looked at Silin.

"Transport!"

Rising cumbersomely, Silin, without looking at the tiny notebook he was holding between finger and thumb, reported:

"I have forty dump-trucks on the line now, twelve of them are 'quarters'. We can deliver the rock-fill non-stop. The fuel-tanks are full, and we're waiting for the signal."

"Good," said Basov nodding.

There were thirty-nine lorries on the line, not forty, and Silin's notepad contained not figures, but an explanation of the incident with Borodulin. Basov, however, had warned in advance that this matter should not be raised at the meeting, but Silin was ready just in case... He waited, but no one asked what the ill-fated dump-truck was doing on the left platform, and Silin sighed with relief.

"Good," repeated Basov more firmly, and Silin sat down.

Skvarsky was delightedly noting down that "good" as a mistake on Basov's part. There was only one thing that Skvarsky couldn't understand. Why had Gatilin kept mum? After all, an incident was an incident! But Basov had already spoken to Gatilin and Alimushkin and had told both of them firmly:

"We'll deal with Borodulin afterwards, in our own time. And please don't get me wrong: I don't intend to justify or cover up for any scapegraces."

...In the silence of the carriage, Dasha was heard whispering to Alimushkin:

"What are 'quarters'?"

"Twenty-five-ton dump-trucks," he replied quickly, and his fingers touched Dasha's hand. At this contact, both their faces flushed and the same thought occurred to them: here they were together, but they hadn't been able to have a talk yet...

After hearing a report from the director of the concrete works, Basov called Korostylev.

"Mechanics?"

"Ready. We're waiting for the signal."

Everybody in headquarters knew about the state of affairs on the sectors and so this roll-call was an empty formality. Basov, however, was afraid that excessive self-confidence just before the operation might demagnetise people. It was too early for complacency and triumph; there was no knowing how the Aniva will behave. Now as never before it was important to be ready for the unexpected. Will, energy, thought—all bunched up into a clenched fist, and then no slackness! And he listened critically to the reports of the section heads, he glared at some of them for being too talkative, at others for an ill-timed joke, although he knew in advance how each service was going to answer his question. The chief

energy man, following Korostylev's brevity, reported "Ready", and emphasised with delight to whom he was reporting: "Comrade Chief of Headquarters..." The signallers jumped up with their eternal briskness: "Communications are communications, everything's reliable until it breaks down!.." Gatilin, as always, did not miss a joke about his logistics... Elena—he looked for her among those present—would address him by his surname as if this would increase the distance between them even further...

Elena was not there, but he asked the question on which the forthcoming decision depended.

"Why has the Hydrometereological Service nothing to say?" he said, raising his voice.

She wasn't there. But she ought to be, she must be. It was a headquarters meeting!

Basov frowned and looked as though he was expecting an explanation. From whom? Anya? She was on duty for headquarters. But Odarchenko did not know the reason for Elena's absence. In his mind's eye, Basov himself was in the hydrometeorological hut. In the morning, when he went down to the Aniva, and saw the slush ice on the river, he realised that it could hamper the blocking operation. Without calling at headquarters, he hurried immediately over to the left bank. Not so much heated by his walk as upset by the change of conditions on the Aniva, he threw open the door of the Met Station, regretting that Elena was still at home when she ought to have spent the night there. The night shift here without her had certainly been wasted, and he did not believe that the sleepy girl who jumped up in fright at his appearance knew anything about the real position. Red-cheeked, in a red turtle-necked sweater, she goggled at Basov with green-tinged eyes as round as walnuts, and lowered her hands; the uncombed chignon somehow stayed in place on her head. The table was littered with hairpins. She hadn't

slept and had been prettying herself up!

Nikita suppressed his fury and said with a grin:

"Well, good soldier Schweik, report!"

"Meteorologist on duty Gordeyeva..." she mumbled almost inaudibly, and, as soon as Basov looked away, the chignon and hairpins vanished. She'd hidden them somewhere.

Basov waited a moment.

"Is that all?"

She nodded her head in assent without changing her stance, and again he understood her cunning: she needed to shake her hair and straighten it, since he kept his eyes on her...

"Not much to report?.." Nikita knew the names of everybody who was on duty that night, and repeated, "Not much, Valentina Gordeyeva? And what's the situation on the Aniva?"

"Oh!" she said guiltily, and clutched at her cheeks. "Forgive me, Nikita Leontievich, I thought you'd come with Elena Ilyinichna..." And, parrot-wise, she rattled off how much the water had fallen, when the slush ice had appeared and in what density. "I've reported it to headquarters... And that's all!" She added.

"Now you've got it right!"

He looked at the notes in the log and went down with Gordeyeva to the control gauge. Certainly, there was no cause to swear at the girl.

"What do you think?" he asked. "Will the slush ice last long?"

"It'll be over by morning. If it gets thick, it means not for long. There's a belief about it. Elena Ilyinichna said so!" she continued, flattering Basov.

Seeing that he was about to go, she said with a slight stammer:

"Nikita Leontievich, you don't know whether technician Perchatkin will be on the operation too, do you?"

"The one under Silin? He will," confirmed

Basov. "He's responsible for driving order in the first column."

"I didn't believe it!" she admitted, and he understood what it was all about from the embarrassed way she blushed.

"Your post is just as important, Gordeyeva."

"Elena Ilyinichna will be here soon!" she said impulsively. "We won't miss anything!"

...So why wasn't Elena at headquarters?

"Did she ring from the Met Station," he asked Anya.

"Yes."

"Could they be waiting for the calculated level from minute to minute? It's taking too long," sighed Nikita to himself and it was hard for him to conceal his impatience, but outwardly he remained calm.

Since Basov was still silent, Gatilin with a careful remark hastened to warn him that he should not spoil the ship for a ha'porth of tar, should not loose his nerves at this very moment.

"The met reports are vital to us." He seemed to be thinking aloud. "We can't allow an oversight... Maybe it's better that Elena Ilyinichna is there now..."

"If she's not here now, why are you sure that she's there?" objected Basov, but it was unlikely that any other explanation could be found; there was no point in arguing, so he asked: "Viktor Sergeyevich, how are the auxiliary services ready, by the way? Are there no jams?"

"Same as with Bagramyan,[1]" grinned Gatilin, satisfied that Nikita understood him rightly. "I can turn the whole front round at a day's notice."

While Basov was calling up the Met Station to find out just where Elena was, Gatilin quite unexpectedly for himself began telling (there

[1] U. A. Bagramyan (1897-1984)—Soviet military leader, Marshal of the Soviet Union.— *Ed.*

weren't any war veterans present to remember) how in 1944, Bagramyan, without the Germans knowing, prepared and carried out a successful manoeuvre: in a few days, he turned nearly the whole First Baltic Front from the Riga direction toward Šiauliai and led it into the offensive.

"A rare operation," sighed Gatilin, "elegant... See how it's all coincided! It's the twenty-third for us, and for them it was the beginning of the twenty-fourth. On that day, the High Command gave the front the task of regrouping forces..."

"Viktor Sergeyevich," said Alimushkin in a strained voice, no longer toying with his matchbox and not looking at Gatilin, and thus involuntarily expressing his dissatisfaction at Gatilin's hint. "What's the point in our changing direction? We're heading in the right one—to the Aniva!"

"To the Aniva, of course!" agreed Gatilin, and he shrugged his shoulders. Why be so captious! He hadn't overdone it with his joke. "Bagramyan's flair wouldn't do us any harm either." He glanced round headquarters. "Exact planning, promptness and discipline!.." As he spoke, he bent over a finger for each factor till his hand was bunched into a fist, then shook it. "And this is the talent appropriate for such operations..." And he grinned, banking on an answering smile from the members of headquarters.

They understood this light skirmish with all its nuances between Gatilin and Alimushkin. Skvarsky livened up too, thinking at once that Gatilin was not simple-minded and Varvara Timofeyevna was not wasting her words on the wind. Beautiful! Only let her prayers go to the right person... For a start, things were not working out badly at all. The slush ice had piled up and torn up the water-level gauge—that, it might be supposed, was an accident, but an accident worthy of a pattern. Gatilin's gauge wouldn't have been turned out, he'd have driven it in himself! And under Gatilin, Borodulin

wouldn't have dared to cavort around like that... And the main thing was that there ought to be a good reason for the absence of Basov's wife too! Fearing to betray his joy prematurely, Skvarsky no longer doubted that the arrow shot, thanks to Shura, had hit its target. And if, supposedly, Elena was still vacillating, the newspaper would deliver the *coup de grâce*... Skvarsky half-raised his head so as not to miss the conversation between Basov and Elena over the switchboard, but at that point Dasha looked round; he caught her eye and realised that they were both watching one another.

Elena answered the headquarters call from the Met Station in person.

"Why haven't you shown up for the meeting?" asked Basov.

"I couldn't..." she said, and repeated Gatilin's comment almost word for word. Then she added, "The regime's unstable, we're having to keep constant watch..."

Basov maintained a disapproving silence, noting evidently how Gatilin looked at him on hearing this: he had said he was right!

"Report the situation as for nine o'clock!" he said to Elena.

"Air temperature minus five, water—minus one point four... Flow rate—seven hundred and fifty cubic metres a second..."

"Has the fall continued during the last few hours or has it stopped?"

"Almost," replied Elena dispassionately. "Slush ice!"

"Your forecast?"

What could she answer. That confounded flow rate didn't depend on her, after all; he knew that perfectly well. But the silence in the headquarters—Elena could hear the restrained breathing of people there through the microphone—demanded an answer.

"We hardly ever take the spinner out of the water," she said with a sigh.

Basov could hear the reproach in her voice. Women!.. It wasn't her fault and she was angry—she would surely say afterwards that he had been getting on her nerves. Even so, she was angry and feeling martyred—that was at least better than not talking at all.

"Carry on, Elena, we're listening to you..." said Basov in a less stern voice than before.

."There are several reasons for the fall being delayed... Slush ice, rains in the upper reaches, sleet... But we can't rule out the possibility of subterranean waters seeping into the Aniva bed. And if that's the case..."

She stopped short, and everybody understood without her saying it. If the flow rate did not fall, it was altogether possible that they would not begin blocking the river after all that year. True, while this was based on Elena's suppositions, the fact remained that with the appearance of slush ice, the level of the Aniva was falling at a disastrously slow rate.

"Apart from measurements," continued Elena, "we are carrying out a comparative analysis of the data on the slush ice. It may be nothing serious..."

"Good," agreed Nikita, and added jokingly, "only don't go to sleep over there!"

"But I..." Elena was silent for a moment and ended in a tired, utterly exhausted voice: "I haven't slept at all, Nikita ... Leontievich..."

This was meant for him alone! Nikita remembered leaving the house. Elena had been lying uncovered, her hair hanging down like seaweed to the floor. He had wanted to lift it up, but had not done so for some reason. Now Elena had let him understand that he had done the wrong thing. Well, of course, if she hadn't slept, it meant that she had been waiting for him to speak to her about the latest reconciliation. How simple it all was for

her! And if there was no river-closing operation, it meant that their private "cold war" would continue... Incidentally, she had already thought something up otherwise she wouldn't have said so. But what was it? After all, this was not the time and place to sort it all out with her. He had not forgotten where he was and that he was being watched, waited for, listened to. Basov pressed the palm of his hand to his temple for a moment, rubbed the bridge of his nose, and thanked Elena in conventional language. Thanked her, when he ought to have read her the riot act for not turning up at headquarters! Oh, well... Dryly reminding her that she shouldn't forget to keep headquarters informed of the flow rate, he switched off. Then, almost automatically, without thinking, he gave out his instructions: Korostylev was to make out for the "Komsomol Searchlight" a bulletin on the flow-rate; let them broadcast it over the radio—the builders should know the position. He asked Gatilin to keep in touch with the airport—a plane-load of visitors was expected at any time, and they must be met. The heads of the sectors and the foremen were to familiarise themselves with the congratulatory telegrams to the collective and particularly interesting ones—from competing associated enterprises, should be read out to the teams. But now... He looked at his watch. It would soon be ten. They could start driving a wedge into the Aniva's throat if she would only open her jaws...

But the most important thought never left his mind.

A flow-rate of seven hundred and fifty cubic metres per second... Twenty-four hours ago, it had been one thousand eight hundred. Yesterday evening, that is, twelve hours ago, it had been about a thousand. The level was falling but, as time passed, less and less quickly... According to logic, with the appearance of slush ice, the level

should rise or stop, but it was still falling, which was just like the Aniva! So what had happened in the last few hours, in the morning? It was as if someone had deliberately opened a sluice-gate and unaccounted for, unplanned water was flowing into the river... Stability had been established literally in the last three or four hours, and Basov didn't like this. It was possible that the fall had stopped altogether. There hadn't been such a high level in winter for thirty years, and now look! But a flow-rate two hundred cubic metres higher than that estimated didn't suit him! Five hundred, five hundred and fifty—that was the control figure for the beginning...

It was already ten in the morning...

Gatilin scrutinised Anya's hurriedly sketched table of the flow-rate and also noted that steady line called stability that Basov disliked so much. Angrily, doubtfully, he muttered:

"It looks as though we might have to put it off altogether."

"You're in a hurry again," protested Alimushkin without looking at him.

"We'll wait!" confirmed Basov. He had made up his mind.

Gatilin was angrily silent. He was retaining the right to intervene at the critical moment, but the devil knew what must happen for that stage to be reached!.. Drumming his fingers on the table, Gatilin was trying to convince himself that he didn't want this at all. Yes, he, Gatilin, was used to being in command, giving instructions, issuing orders, being listened to the moment he started speaking... He was used to it, but perhaps he also loved thinking aloud at such moments, consulting those round him, asking, objecting, arguing... Having already made up his mind, he allowed himself to find out how near his subordinates were to him in scope and depth of thought, and he enjoyed this, although, on the other hand, he was

teaching them to think!.. Now, deprived of any such possibility, he was convinced that he was taking the enforced inactivity worse than anyone else. Waiting was indeed an agony to him, and he even nearly said aloud "It's murder!.." but checked himself just in time, and forgetting that he was repeating himself, asked impatiently:

"So what are we going to do?"

"Block the river," answered Basov calmly. "You can dismiss now... Next headquarters meeting at noon."

Silin got noisily to his feet and was the first to go out to the entrance and light a cigarette. Through the open door with the cold came the freezing river dampness and the roar of the Aniva. Lyuba appeared, breathless and rosy-cheeked from the outside air. She went in cautiously—"Excuse me!"—but no one paid any attention. Vasya Korostylev smiled at her and Lyuba nodded to him. Everything was all right. She went up to Basov.

"Nikita Leontievich, I ran over to the hospital..."

"Well, how's Borodulin, what's the matter with him?"

"Shock. The doctors said he'll recover his sight completely... He kept on asking if anything had happened... He thought it had been something awful. I told him—no."

"What? You talked to him?" Basov was surprised.

"I sneaked into the ward," admitted Lyuba and, looking round at Alimushkin, who was standing nearby, lowered her voice to a whisper: "Borodulin is scared you're going to give him hell."

"Aha!" intervened Alimushkin, and then mimicking Lyuba, "He doesn't know what came over him, it happened of its own accord."

"Of course he knows it's his own fault, he played the fool!" said Lyuba hotly, unaware that

she had blurted out Borodulin's own words. And then, beseechingly: "He won't do it again, he's come to his senses. All right, Nikita Leontievich?"

Basov shook his head sadly.

"He won't do it again, Lyuba."

Offended at the lack of understanding, Lyuba went over to Vasya Korostylev.

After hearing this conversation, Silin walked to the table.

"I won't give Borodulin a lorry, not for the upper dam, or the lower either. That's that."

"You will," objected Basov. "If not, I'll let him drive my car, and he'll still overtake your monsters."

At this point, Alimushkin backed Silin.

"So you consider yourself formally in the right?" asked Basov.

"What's formality get to do with it, when you consider his attitude to technical equipment..."

"I don't agree," said Basov wearily. "That's a moot point too."

He rose to his feet. They'd caught him on the raw! He was not intending to speak his mind for the time being; he didn't like bare words, but he was not used to keeping quiet either when there was an idea at stake. And there was one, still somehow vague, and Alimushkin would be sure to challenge it, but...

"Gavrila Panteleimonovich," he asked, "have you studied the default report on the excavator driven by Borodulin? Study it, and critically... For instance, the boom snapped. Why? Sloppiness on the operator's part, or metal fatigue natural under our conditions?.. It was possible not to break it, agreed! But does that mean never subjecting the machine to a load? Let it stand idle for a hundred years... But estimate, as a matter of interest, what sort of performance will an excavator give for over five years given that it works with the maximum load, that is, until it wears out! Five

years, and then it goes to the scrap heap. Compare that figure with the output of an excavator that lasts ten years thanks to underloading, underworking, repair and maintenance. I'm afraid Borodulin will prove right. What's the point of preserving machinery for its own sake when it's supposed to work? And remember, too, that at the present rate of development, a machine becomes morally obsolete in five years. In the North, it simply falls to bits..."

"But morality doesn't go obsolete!" commented Alimushkin.

"Well argued!" Nikita shook his head. "But a revolution isn't made with a pickaxe, Pyotr Evseyevich. Wrong century."

"It's no use trying to justify Borodulin," sighed Silin. "It'll all be confirmed after we've blocked the river."

"I'm not relieving him of the blame," agreed Basov, "but hard work and individualism aren't the same thing..."

While they were talking, the others still hadn't left the van. They were afraid of missing the operation. Basov wanted to joke: "It's all right, comrades, we're not going to start without you," but he realised that this wouldn't do. As he had given them their instructions, so they in their turn had said the necessary to their men. All were inwardly tense with expectation, and he must be the first to leave headquarters. He mustn't let the people cool off, he must do something, walk about, make a fuss: there must be movement so that each felt the rhythm. With his jacket on already, he went away from the table and glanced at the coatstand. Someone handed him his coat.

"Well, now ... we still have time," said Basov and his voice had changed, losing its official stinginess. "On a day like this, we, I think, should go up Fraternity Rock, to Snegirev... How about it, Pyotr?"

Alimushkin nodded.

"It's our duty."

All began getting ready to go out. Basov looked back at Anya. She had also stood up, but was hesitating. Basov had forgotten to warn somebody to take over from her for at least half an hour. Gatilin noticed this and said:

"Off you go, Anna Fyodorovna, off you go. I have to keep in touch with the port anyway. You'll have time..."

Anya looked gratefully at him and at Basov, who smiled.

"Shall I come too?" Dasha asked Alimushkin.

"Why, aren't we both pioneers, then?.." he joked, but Dasha could see from the sad look in his eyes, that he was worried about something else. There was no knowing what had happened that morning, and he had been tense all the time, although he was not letting it show...

There was a good view of the operations sector from the narrow platform on the right bank of the Aniva where the headquarters van stood. The road looped round the cliff to come out opposite the van on to the wide right-bank dumping platform. This was where the lorries could turn round in three, four or even five in a row so as to discharge their rockfill simultaneously. Further on, along the northern rim of the platform, stood the bulldozers of Korostylev's team. On the left bank, the platform had been cut out of the cliff and was considerably smaller than the one opposite. There, apart from the excavator, stood Borodulin's dump-truck on its own, with the grey lump of granite in the back. The inscription painted on it in white-wash: "Submit, Aniva!" could be seen from the porch of the van, and from the bridge, where there was a big crowd of people. "They could have at least thrown it in to stop it being such an eyesore!" thought Basov. He himself couldn't give

such an order, yet there was no other daredevil quite like Borodulin...

While headquarters had been in session, the gloomy cliff of the gorge had changed slightly, being dotted with the quivering red colour of flags—on the bulldozers, on the bridge and over headquarters, and there were banners over the heads of the workers...

"All this glory hurts the eyes!" said Basov quietly to Alimushkin, meaning, isn't it a bit early to be celebrating, Party Organiser?

Alimushkin stepped down off the porch and to one side, looking round him as if in astonishment. He threw his hands apart. There was no one on the little patch of ground in front of the van apart from him, and he seemed to be the only one without a flag.

"Fallen behind, Pyotr Evseyevich?" added Basov half-jesting, half-reproachful.

"The Komsomols put themselves out for me," he replied, and he was clearly pleased with the youngsters.

The sky was covered with an even, smoky pall, like suede. At the upper falls, rising over the ridge of rocks, the Aniva seemed to be forcing her heavy, leaden streams over them. Looking at them from afar, you would never believe that the waters there were bubbling and foaming—this was because the nearer they came to the Rapids, the purer became the Aniva's waters and the darker its waves, and, rocking gently, a few ice-floes were floating past. Basov watched them go by, but it was some time before it struck him that the slush ice was over... He spoke about it incredulously aloud. Anya, standing beside him, immediately went back to the van, rang Elena at her station and then glumly announced:

"Seven hundred and forty..."

Could there possibly be a blockage upstream? They would have to wait again!.. Wait, until all

the broken ice had been through the mincing-machine of the Rapids... How long would that take—an hour, three hours or more?

The builders were shouting something on the bridge and waving flags, but the roar of the Rapids drowned their voices. Basov glanced briefly at the slogans hung on the bridge in honour of the operation, and Alimushkin, back again on the van porch, pointed to the rock through which the tunnel had been driven.

"Over there, on the left platform, can you see it?" he asked, almost jubilantly. "A personal invitation!"

"Welcome, Aniva!" Basov read.

"You have blocked all exits and entrances with your banners," he said. "All it needs is now the Aniva."

"We'll block it all right, and not only with words."

"Go easy!"

Basov took out a cigarette, lit up and rested his elbows on the railing. Alimushkin grasped that Basov wanted to be alone. With a nod to him —"Don't be late, we'll be waiting"—Alimushkin hurried to Dasha and Anya who had stopped by the Rapids and were looking in their direction.

As he watched Alimushkin leave, Basov's eyes involuntarily fell on Fraternity Rock, scored with terraces and rising over the Rapids like an eccentric skyscraper with its head swathed in mist. A black stone giant, eternally dissatisfied with everything... The terraces rose up the rockface almost to the summit. It was somewhat frightening to climb up them if you weren't used to it, but there were plenty of daredevils nowadays—why, even now someone had opened a coloured parasol on top, as if at the seaside. They were waiting... The sky over the Aniva was changing quickly; it had not brightened with the coming of day, however, but had turned bleak, blue-black, as

before a thunderstorm. Against this background, the fluttering red seemed particularly alarming. Basov threw back his head. On top of the crag, over the abyss, was a thin, scarcely distinguishable mast with a threadbare, faded flag, originally put up there by the pioneers. It was flapping violently in the gusts of wind, and Basov seemed to hear the stiff snapping of the fabric. When they built the electric power station, the old flag would be replaced with a new one, but it was saddening to think about that now...

Kolya Sokolyonok, assistant to the concrete-layers' teamleader, sidled guiltily up to the entrance of the van. The team had evidently sent him, small in stature and the most frisky, on reconnaissance... Noticing that he had been spotted on the approaches, Kolya asked Basov with a dissatisfied expression, as if the chief of the headquarters was messing up his team task.

"Nikita Leontievich, will it be soon, then?"

"What are you so cross about," said Basov, asking question for question. "The builders are spectators at the operation; the drivers are the ones who tame the river."

"That's a fact," said Kolya, looking even more glum, supposing that there was no other way of talking to the management, and there was always more respect for a stern man, but, as a mere boy, he could not keep up a seriousness untypical of him and he candidly confessed: "We're on tenterhooks..."

"Watch the Aniva," advised Basov, "over there, look, beyond the upper falls... When the rocks rise up so that a sparrow can hop across, that's when we'll start."

"Supposing I hop across?"

"You will, at least," agreed Basov, and both laughed.

"Well now, Sokolyonok," said Basov, serious now, "I'm going to ask a question this time..."

Kolya waited. "How are the lads feeling... Shall we close it?"

"The Aniva? We'll close it, what choice has it got?"

"Yes, indeed, what choice has it got?" repeated Basov to himself, shrugging his shoulders as Kolya hurried away. Today was the twenty-third, the day of the autumn equinox. His mother used to say that it was the day when everything came together—good and evil, and man stood between them... And he also remembered from his childhood, a simple riddle: "What was yesterday and will be tomorrow?" Day!.. Day, year, epoch and all the remoteness of human existence, visible in the past and invisible in the future, was linked by a single and uninterrupted time, in which the ordinary habitual words "yesterday" and "today" were frontiers of being, and between which titanic work was being accomplished every moment.

He could breathe easy now, in the open spaciousness of morning. The damp wind was ripping an icy dust off the Aniva, and a shivery but pleasant cold fanned his face. The times in which he had been living, youth and energy had made him happy, and he understood this. With this sensation, he felt less alarmed.

He arrived at headquarters in the morning, already familiar with the Borodulin incident. He listened to Anna's report in silence, then Alimushkin had chimed in, and Basov grasped that they were worried only about the boulder, as if no human being was involved; it never entered their heads how it could have ended if Borodulin, blinded by the searchlight, had not held the machine on the platform...

He became particularly furious at their "precise, coordinated actions"! He shouted at Anna, not noticing in the heat of the moment how he stung her with hurtful words—"irresponsibility", "slovenliness". Choking with tears, she had run

out of the van. He did not stop her. Then Alimushkin shook him roughly by the shoulder.

"Pull yourself together, Nikita!"

Without looking up at Alimushkin, Basov reached for his cigarettes, but the matches kept breaking. Basov suddenly crumpled up the cigarette and threw it away. His fingers reached for the tumbler-switch on the panel; he turned on the external loudspeaker and said huskily into the microphone:

"Anya, come back! It's all my fault!"

She returned, of course. Alimushkin began to reconcile them awkwardly, but somehow it didn't work. Then Basov remembered how many times he had said at operations meetings, bringing a smile to the faces of all present:

"Well, now, Pyotr Evseyevich, really... You can't get angry with Odarchenko. She's right in definitely all instances!"

Except that they had laughed because it was true, and not bravado.

Alimushkin sighed:

"Really! You're supposed to be serious people!"

But to himself, Basov could admit that he always made sure that his attitude to Anna Odarchenko was as stable and as demanding as to his other subordinates. If he ever showed her more respect and attention, it was because she was a woman and genuinely deserving of it...

He ought to have remembered that just before having a row with her.

On returning when it was still dark from the Met Station, and knowing that Gordeyeva would never take her eyes off the Aniva until Elena arrived, he was in no hurry to reach headquarters. Making a detour round the left bank promontory, which was already crowded at that early hour, Basov went down to the "bomb beach" to spend a little time in the quiet, alone with the Aniva. Beyond the

promontory, the bank was scattered with big boulders like cast-iron cannonballs. A string of such boulders ran forward a long way down stream, and there wasn't a soul to be seen. Jumping over the slippery rocks, iced-up during the night, Basov soon reached the bend where, exhausted by the steep gradient from the Rapids, the Aniva looped round and then, straightening out again, flowed calmly towards its estuary. A few paces from the bank, beyond a strip of eternally seething water, there rose a white, porous slab of flat, massive rock, like an ice-floe. There were several such stones on the Aniva. This one was called "Margrave", and there were also "Talnakh" and "Rosa", but they were further down stream, and the captains were chary of sailing too close to them. Near these rocks, the river was rough both at low and high water, there was a strong current pulling towards them, and during the first navigation season, owing to negligence on the captain's part, a big transport had staved in its bottom on the "Margrave".

Nikita even now thought it madness that he and Anya had shot the Rapids. He had said it a thousand times, and was ready to say it again to all and sundry who were attracted by the roaring waves that it was beautiful but pointless. There was no sense in risking your life! And all this without disingenuousness, not in the least because it was not done to approve such behaviour, but simply because he couldn't find any justification for the risk. He knew that people for whom wild adventurousness has meaning are few and far between, and that is probably why he could not prevent Anya, dissuade her or forbid her such senselessness. It was also doubtful whether he could have said precisely why he had joined her, but he had never regretted it.

Alimushkin went up to Basov as he stood at the

site of the future dam. Unable to see Nikita's smiling face, Alimushkin turned him round by the shoulder and, looking him straight in the eye, asked:

"So you haven't been able to do anything with the Aniva. Will you close it with your ideas?"

"What of it?" replied Basov defiantly.

"What of what?"

"D'you think it won't work?"

"That's just it!.." It was even as if Alimushkin had taken offence. "You have one law, I know. The pressure of the water is proportional to the cube of the velocity... Let's go, shall we? They're waiting!"

If Alimushkin had started talking in formulas, it meant that he felt poetically inclined. "I'll catch you out now!" thought Basov. He stopped Alimushkin with dissatisfaction near the old derrick, still left from the suspension bridge.

"Wait... You smell of perfume!"

"It's not me!"

"Ah, so it's from the derrick!"

And, without pity for the embarrassed Alimushkin, Basov roared with laughter at him. The other flushed and tried to say something in self-justification, but Basov wouldn't let him; he just waved at him and laughed. It was the first time during the last few days, which had been full of apprehension, that he had laughed so freely and with such lack of constraint.

"All right, you've made me laugh myself sick," he said, finally recovering his breath. "You know, I'm feeling a bit better!"

Alimushkin kicked a pebble with the toe of his boot and said nothing. He had been intending to talk about Dasha, but he wasn't going to now...

Basov jerked the drum of the derrick round; the pawl grated over the ratchet, but he hadn't finished censuring Alimushkin.

"You're not a resourceful fellow, Pyotr Ev-

seyevich! On a day like today, even a derrick can smell of perfume..."

Alimushkin walked on a little way, then asked. "Is everything all right with you?"

Basov actually stopped dead in astonishment.

"With me? If anything had happened, d'you think I'd have been laughing like that?" He shook his head. "Really, Alimushkin... We've been working together for three years, and you don't know me at all. Let's get acquainted, eh?" and in a whisper, as one conspirator to another, "What's supposed to be happening?"

"Can't you guess?" said Alimushkin disbelievingly. "They say the Aniva's got to be closed..."

The word "Aniva" pronounced by Alimushkin separately and in a low voice, sounded like, "But not you"... And Basov, who had grasped this playful subtlety, raised his voice, joking, of course, and not admitting to himself how close his joke could be to the truth:

"Why this 'but not we'? We! We must block it and we shall!" And he thumped himself on the chest.

Dasha and Anna were waiting for them at the bend in the road to the excavation in the rock where the generator hall of the station was to be built. While the men were talking among themselves, Anya told Dasha in a few words the story of Viktor Snegirev—except that she didn't mention that she had been with him on the last expedition; but his portrait, which had been hanging in Anya's room, and which Dasha suddenly remembered, told a great deal.

Snegirev and a few more with him went out to survey the route of the proposed high-voltage transmission line. It was the end of winter, the twilight was not so deep, and the conditions seemed favourable for a survey. Four of them went out, and three returned to Barakhsan.

Without Viktor...

One couldn't believe it. As if anyone could die, only not him, always cheerful, agile, never downhearted, still as shy as a little boy...

After being put down a few dozen kilometres from Barakhsan, the group had covered almost the whole of the route. They had three or four days more to go on the road, but it was May, the first days of May, the tundra's mildest month, and no one had realised how crafty it could be.

The blizzards were particulary fierce in the Arctic as winter was on the way out, but they had screamed their last; every day the sun had been brighter, higher and warmer. The boys were delighted by it and never bore in mind, or rather it was impossible for them to have guessed, that the tundra in May was dangerous. The snow began melting. It stuck to their skis in great lumps; they had to abandon them, but even so the boys were getting exhausted. They decided to move at night-time, or at dawn, when the top of the snow was freezing hard again; but it crumbled and gave way under their feet. The water that had melted in the daytime sank into the snow. There were rivulets flowing in the gullies and hollows under the snow-crust, hardened by the night frosts. Viktor went first. He was protected by a rope and he carried a pole; but the surface gave way on one of the rivulets, the rope snapped, cut as if by a razorblade; Viktor shouted something and disappeared.

Before this, they had wanted to go down to the ice, on the Aniva, but had not managed it. Melted ice was already seeping out from the banks. The boys had decided to continue on their route... Dasha thought she saw a black hole with the water gurgling in it, and she could hear the snow-cap, sliding and settling with a dry crunch, turning black and sucking up the water, and she heard it slurping under the fallen mass, then it was rocked

and pulled by a whirlpool into a gnawed, iced-up cave. An enormous sun hung overhead in a smoky mist. In waves, like sandhills, the snow extended away into the distance as far as the eye could see.

Pure white snow is rare in the Arctic. It can only be seen in early autumn, and even then as a novelty, when, as it falls, it covers the brown mosses and the yellowing grasses that had been lush only the day before. From autumn to spring, the snows here change colour daily—from deep violet and even carmine in winter, during the Northern Lights, to dense grey, almost black in the impenetrable, starless nights, and they shine particularly brightly after the middle of March. The more sun and light, the bluer and softer the snow-clad tundra becomes. They say the cause is a microscopic cosmic dust which settles on the Earth's ice-caps at the Poles; but, perhaps, the snow becomes bright because of the thaw and because of the green grasses shining through as soon as they sense the first warmth of spring...

Dasha seemed to see the calm, pale-blue waves of snow with their greenish tinge and, compared with them, the idea of death was so stupid, so monstrous that she wanted to run into the distance, towards that nameless rivulet, as if it were possible to turn time back again.

Dasha did not know that Alimushkin had flown there with Basov. Both saw the frosty steam swirling and the water gurgling in the black hole and they thought, each blaming only himself, that they needn't have sent Viktor... But if not Viktor, wouldn't someone else have gone?

It was Snegirev who should be written up in the newspaper and remembered on the day of the river-closing operation! But before this, Dasha had another dismaying thought. Alimushkin, her Pyotr, was also running a risk in the North, and she had not even thought... No sooner had she arrived than she had already sniffed her disapproval!

Alimushkin calmed her in headquarters to stop her being nervous—everything was going normally, he assured her! He didn't even pay any attention to Skvarsky. And she ... she considered that she, more than the rest, wanted the closing operation to start precisely on schedule. Dasha could not conceal this desire, because, probably, she saw herself not as an outsider on the project, but involved in what was most important, involved through Alimushkin, Basov and her father... When they put off the closing operation, and calmly, too, without any particular emotion, she began to imagine that they had nevertheless known earlier (and Alimushkin precisely) how that morning's session would end. So what was the need for all the performance with the reports and for checking that the services were ready? She had been bewildered and upset that Pyotr hadn't warned her.

Alimushkin laughed amiably at her anger.

"It's your first time after all," he said. "You didn't notice, and you couldn't have noticed, the way Basov, when he came in, immediately took his coat off as if there were another twenty-four hours to go before the operation... And Gatilin? He's sprawling about, he's not in a hurry to go anywhere... Only you and I are on tenterhooks, and Skvarsky... Don't you find it so?"

Alimushkin's eyes, hollow with fatigue and insomnia, had a sad look, but he was smiling, perhaps with an effort, and the wrinkles gathered under his eyelids were trembling slightly.

Now that Basov had gone out ahead with Anya, Alimushkin had the same guiltily mocking expression. They were climbing a bare foothill stretching along the north-west of the mountain from the foundation pit almost to the summit, and the wind up there was strong; it could blow you off your feet. Dasha wanted to press the palms of her hands to his cheeks and say something affection-

ate and nice, but he spoke first.

"You're not angry, are you?"

"No," said Dasha with a smile. "I wasn't angry then either; it was just in the heat of the moment."

The monotonous rocky slope was surmounted by a pyramid—a *gurii,* piled up according to the custom of the Northern explorers. The *gurii* usually warned the traveller of danger or indicated a camp-site, but this one was a memorial to Snegirev.

"Don't you find," asked Alimushkin, tensely intercepting her glance at the *gurii,* "that Alimushkin pure and simple is one thing, but Alimushkin the project's Party Organiser is something quite different?"

"No," replied Dasha.

She had thought before answering. She considered that Snegirev's death had been caused by carelessness, negligence, an accident; but was it possible to foresee everything in advance? It wasn't important whether you were Alimushkin plain and simple or the Party Organiser. It would be good, but...

"Circumstances can be stronger than we are," she said.

"I understand," he agreed, but he was actually objecting.

His voice was warmer, suggesting admission, and Dasha felt good that she had not been mistaken about him.

"I know," he continued, sure that Dasha would understand, "I know there was a risk... And always when man is making a beginning, there will be risk for a long time to come. But not forever, you understand? It would be easier for me if I did not understand. Anything except a human being can be re-made, restored. But here, there isn't even a grave. When we decided to build a *gurii* on the crag, we didn't appeal to anyone, we thought each would bring a stone... But they," and with a

bitter, pointed smile he nodded towards the Aniva, where there were now builders as young, as strong and as passionate as Snegirev, and Dasha noticed that pained smile of his, "they're only inspired by big things... It was the advance-party members that brought the stones. How's that, lads? They say—there isn't anything up there anyway..." He looked at the ground and repeated in someone else's voice: "'Solid cast-iron permafrost...'"

He looked in bewilderment at Dasha.

"How could it be so, Dasha? Have I lost touch with the times? Shouldn't I think that way?"

"You must teach. You can't make people feel and suffer the same way," she objected gently, "you must teach them to understand..."

"That's wrong. For there to be emptiness in the soul, cold, permafrost—that's wrong too. We were just talking about that this morning!"

"Everyone must understand this and experience it individually," said Dasha, and Alimushkin took this as agreement with something else very important to them both, for which the words won't always come straight away, but without which here is no understanding or agreement between people who are close to one another.

They climbed up to the summit, where they were being waited for in silence by Basov, Anna Odarchenko, Korostylev, Lyuba Evdokimova and a few others whom Dasha didn't know. Behind the pyramid, built of even, smooth stones, towered a steel mast and a flag. A cold, gusty wind was booming in the hollows, tearing at the frayed, sun-bleached flag on its pole. Far below, as in a grove between the wooded hills, lay Barakhsan, over which, almost just above the roof-tops, hung a sky black with snow clouds. The town was grim and deserted, but in the evening Dasha had liked it for the lights shining in windows, for the noise and the crowds in the streets... She looked in the opposite direction towards where the steep, ter-

raced sides of Fraternity Rock receded towards the Aniva, and the ribbon of the river itself, grey at a distance, seemed motionless, but only for a moment, because beyond the bridge, fluttering with bright bunting and colourful because of the crowds on it, swirled the ash-grey furrows of the waterfall, and the river waters, cramped into a narrow fissure, were gurgling and foaming; and it seemed strange that the furious noise did not carry to them... Perhaps the wind was deflecting the roar of the Rapids away, or it was being drowned by the snapping of the flag overhead; but something alive, urgent and disturbing, like the rapid beating of the heart, was powerfully alive here on the crag, and Dasha thought that the others had sensed it too.

The summit was covered with a fine, icy crust of rime. The wind was blowing from the north, binding the frosty air into stiff sheafs. Dasha's gaze, travelling from the summit to the base of the *gurii,* alighted on something that violated its form. Conspicuous among the bulging, cast-iron-hued stones of the pyramid was an uneven slab of brown granite with its sides cut on the slant. On the rough surface were sprays, frozen in the night frost, of late flowers and of what looked like rowanberries. The red, frost-bitten bunches caught the eye and, shielding Dasha from the wind, Alimushkin said to her in a low voice:

"I seem to have been wrong... Berries don't grow on permafrost, nor do flowers..."

Basov came up to them after standing in silence for a time at the *gurii.*

"What are you two conspirators whispering about?" He took them both by the arm and, leading them round the summit of the crag to where the wind was less boisterous, said, "You might not be interested in this, Dasha, but Pyotr, do you know what I remember most often when I'm here? Our trip to Divnogorsk!"

Basov was referring to something that concerned not only Viktor Snegirev, but the rest, and them, perhaps, even more now. It was about what should be regarded as most important in life. Snegirev had worked on the winter road, had driven a tunnel and had marked out the route for the high-voltage transmission line. All this had been important and necessary to the project. There was much else that he had not lived long enough to accomplish, but the most important thing, probably, was how he had wanted to live.

Towering over the black wing of the Yenisei, the Krasnoyarsk dam staggered them all. Washed by rains and scorched by the Siberian sun, the concrete had already lost its original freshness and, perhaps, for that reason, the first view of the monolithic shoulders of the kilometre-long dam cutting into the reddish cliffs seemed to suggest that it had been standing there for centuries. There was a strange, exalted thrill in the thought that all this had been created not by nature, but partly, as it were, in spite of nature. It had been created by imperfect and still very weak man, but through that weakness it could be felt very strongly how great man was; his reason was celebrating its triumph here.

Then they went by river boat to the Krasnoyarsk reservoir. The shores disappeared from view, the seagulls no longer screamed astern, the eye was lulled and wearied by the monotony of the ribbed waves. Someone noticed a solitary tree ahead. "The shore!.." came the cry of relief. A tall larch with blackened branches was standing in the water stark naked, without any foliage; and this was strange, because the roots of mighty trees die with the years. The steamer slowed down without changing course; the captain was clearly well acquainted with the new reservoir. The water absorbed the boat's inertia; obedient to the helm, it stopped sideways on to the larch. The water was

pure and transparent, illumined by the whitish yellow of the sand of the bed of the man-made sea. Basov, with Snegirev beside him, peered down into the depths, unable to understand what the reflection was... Realising that they weren't imagining it, they clearly saw in the water enormous boulders in the clutch of the rotted roots. The tree, torn out by blasting, with rock fragments still in its roots, had been forgotten and abandoned on the ground. When the water came, the larch floated, vertical like a fisherman's float, and now, like a wandering phantom, was being carried along by the waves. There was something unnatural and evil in this which could not be hidden from view, like a slovenly and callous attitude to nature. His face darkening, Viktor said to Basov vith a note of reproach that Basov accepted and forgave:

"Is it going to be like that with us too?"

Someone curiously stretched a hand over the rail and touched the trunk—the larch swayed, it took so little to upset its equilibrium, and it was no longer possible to reach it again: it had been lost forever.

"No, Viktor..." replied Basov and then paused momentarily. It seemed too early to think about the bottom of the Barakhsan reservoir, but he realised in time that he was wrong. His hand was resting on his comrade's shoulder. Making a promise to himself and to Snegirev, he said: "Our project will be run on different lines. There won't be any of that..."

In that tree was their common pain, alive now, as then. Basov felt that he must say something about it.

On the way back to headquarters, they stopped at the rocky terrace on the south slope, from which there was a good view of both dumping platforms and the dark-blue headquarters van. The

bridge, as before, was crowded with people, but some of them had gone over to a bonfire lit in a quiet spot not far from Korostylev's bulldozers. Basov thought he could see figure of a man sitting by the fire, but it was nevertheless impossible to say who it was and, glancing round at Korostylev, who was also looking down, he asked:

"You don't happen to have a pair of binoculars on you, do you?"

He knew that Vasya didn't have any and had asked him as a joke, but the other imperturbably unbuttoned his coat and took a telescope from round his neck.

"Got anything else?" asked Basov with a smile.

Vasya turned back the skirt of his coat to reveal a white megaphone with a red handle attached to his belt.

"And the pistol?" laughed Nikita. "If you're armed to the teeth, you must have a pistol."

"A flare-pistol," admitted Korostylev.

Basov shook his head and began focussing the telescope. Behind him, Lyuba Evdokimova asked Korostylev in a whisper: "Let's have a shot, Vasya!" "You can fire it in the evening, I'll let you!" he promised, also in a whisper. Basov recognised the figure at the campfire: it was Vantulyaku. The old man usually came to Barakhsan alone, but he had a young Nganasani with him this time; if Basov's memory didn't deceive him, it was Vantulyaku's grandson, Vova Tokko. When Basov had been at Lake Vachug, the lad had asked him several times if it was possible for a Nganasani to cut iron with fire. "It is," Basov had replied, "you only have to learn how." And he had invited him to come after he had finished his schooling... The time certainly flew fast! With a sigh, Basov handed the telescope back to Korostylev.

"Vantulyaku's brought his grandson. Put him down as apprentice welder..." And to Anya:

"Your guest has called! Are the coloured beads ready? You promised..."

"Vantulyaku? He certainly guessed right!" said Anya in astonishment, and, imitating the old man's voice, she wheezed, "I shall, however, come and see, how the *lyosa* Soviets drive the Aniva into a trap... I shall move the trap away..."

Anya stopped short in mid-phrase. She could see a grey-green car with a yellow tarpaulin patch on its side hurriedly reversing near the headquarters van. It was Basov's, and from the way it jerked into full speed and raced along the road towards them, she knew that Basov was urgently needed down there on the Aniva.

"We must go at once!" she said. "It looks as though they've sent the car for us."

After headquarters, Skvarsky had an impulse to latch on to Basov's group—Malyshev's girl, as he christened Dasha, to judge by all accounts, had not had the chance to tell Basov about her night wanderings, and on the rock, with him present, she would hardly dare... But it was impossible to chase everywhere after Dasha. Moreover, the decisive events were to take place here. It was strange, though, that no one had questioned him about the newspaper...

Whether it was to the point now or not, he caught the eye of Valentin Beskudin, whose verse was being published in the edition. Curly-haired, merry already, he had lost his hat somewhere, but was wearing a red scarf that covered his whole chest. He unceremoniously flicked Skvarsky's shoulder with his gloves and said in his deep voice, holding out his hands:

"Have you cut me again? The soul of a poet will not survive the humiliation of petty insults... Is that how you serve the working people?"

"You surprise me, Beskudin... Incidentally, I

printed half a long poem, but I hear no word of thanks..."

Beskudin thoughtfully transferred his gloves from one hand to the other, straightened up and adjusted his scarf, but did not believe Skvarsky.

"Nonsense! You would have already shoved it under my nose by now."

"Of course, it should be presented to you on a silver tray," grinned Skvarsky. "You should look after that yourself."

"I bet you've sent it to the post office?.. Fool! Who needs it there?.. When will you ever learn?.. And the people want heroes! Left them without a song, eh? People spend the night up here, waiting, and you? I'd send you a dump-truck. All you have to do is give the word. I'd dish them out myself, with my autograph. I won't write for you after that!.. No, I don't agree. I'll go this minute and recite it over the microphone so that they'll know Valentin Beskudin!.. Who's in headquarters, any idea?"

"Gatilin."

"Ahh..." he drawled uncertainly. "What have the people all gathered there for, behind the bulldozers?"

"I don't know," Skvarsky shrugged his shoulders, inwardly admitting that Beskudin was right: the newspaper should have been brought here; by evening it would have lost its impact. A good thing he had sent Ivanetsky with a copy to Elena...

"Let's go, let's go." Beskudin unceremoniously tugged at his sleeve. "Let's have a look at what's going on there... You ought to be in the know, but you're still resisting... Resisting what? My inner voice!"

Beskudin had not been deceived by his "inner voice". When they squeezed through to the circle near the bonfire, they saw Vantulyaku and his grandson. The old man was telling how, on a trip to Barakhsan, they had frightened a beautiful

lyosa girl away from the river. For some reason, she had been taking the Aniva's temperature with a thermometer.

"That's at the Met Station," said Beskudin, immediately joining in the conversation and, forgetting about Skvarsky, he sat down near the old man, with whom he had a friendship that many could not understand. "Come on, Vantulyaku, more! Perhaps I'll write a poem... A woman with a long plait, yes?" he asked thinking of Elena, and Vantulyaku nodded in assent, but promptly objected.

"A long braid, however, yes! But a short skirt, and boots..."

"And were you shy?" asked Valentin to the general laughter.

Vantulyaku took offence. What was funny about it? He had been telling about the girl not because she was beautiful, but because she was as evil as a she-jackal. And he was telling it for his grandson, so that Vova Tokko would know how evil the *lyosa* women were. The son of his son, if he wished to take a wife must choose a young and docile *vazhenka*. Vantulyaku explained this in detail to Beskudin, unable to understand why the young Tokko blushed and was embarrassed.

"What was this girl or woman doing?" prompted Beskudin.

The woman had left the house with the white roof that is behind the mountain. She had gone into the water, not noticing the noiseless boats approaching from leeward. "Barakhsan to you!.." Vantulyaku had said in greeting, and Vova Tokko had echoed him with "Barakhsan!" The *lyosa* woman had screamed, stared at them as if she did not want to recognise them as human beings. "However," joked Vantulyaku, "if you stand there long you'll wet your skirt." Again she could not understand what he meant, and Vantulyaku explained: "The water rises, it rises much, yes?"

"You think I'm blind, or something? I can see, can't I?" And splashing through the water like a *khaptarka,* she went back.

"A *shaitan,* not a woman," agreed Beskudin, and he looked at the old man's grandson with laughing eyes. "You had a glorious young stag there, old man, but she paid no attention. Never mind, Vova, we'll find you a *vazhenka* better than any on your farm. You just show me one who takes your fancy..."

"Let's have a smoke. Let's have a smoke!" It was Dryl, laughing merrily with the rest, slightly tipsy, and shouting in Valentin's ear.

"Get going!.." Beskudin mockingly pushed him away. "He's got himself a *makhorka* factory, and now he's always cadging cigarettes..."

This was reference to Klavdia and her buffet. Dryl understood and took offence. Perhaps he was not offended for Klavdia's sake, but because an elbow had been shoved into his chest as if he were a puppy. And his arms were too short for him to give as good as he got—he needed a stick! Then he would teach that Beskudin a lesson!

Dryl scowled, moved reluctantly away from the cosy spot by the fire and the circle, forgetting why he had come and muttering whatever came into his head:

"The water's rising, but he won't let me smoke... The water's rising, but he won't let..."

Someone was standing close by, in a reindeer-fur hat, which meant he was an educated man. Said Dryl to him:

"The water's rising..."

On the other side, Kolya Sokolyonok, grinned from ear to ear at Dryl when he said:

"But he won't let me smoke..."

"What are you on about, Dryl?" asked Kolya merrily. "Want a smoke? I've got half a pack—here, take it!"

"What?" Dryl was flummoxed for a moment and

took a cigarette, but kept saying out of inertia, "The water's rising..."

And then he suddenly realised what he was babbling. He shook his head, and it was as if his drunkenness had been blown away by the wind.

"Ko-olka," he said huskily. "Did you understand? Go to Basov! Get moving and tell him Dryl says the water's rising... That one said it, the old goat," he nodded towards Vantulyaku. "Get moving, something's wrong!"

Sokolyonok gaped, muddled by getting in everybody's way, out of nothing better to do. He had himself heard the old man droning monotonously away, but only now did he realise what a threat Dryl had spotted. He ran at full pelt to headquarters and jumped into Basov's car, knowing that Basov was on the summit, shouted breathlessly to Boris Shavyrin, the driver:

"Get up the hill, quick! Basov's wanted!.."

More eloquent than words was the studied gesture—the fingernail behind the tooth and then round the neck. Boris, an intelligent lad, didn't waste time asking questions...

No sooner had the dust settled behind the departing car than Skvarsky hurried into headquarters, slightly flushed and unusually agitated.

"Viktor Sergeyevich," he said, clutching at his heart with one hand and unbuttoning his greatcoat with the other, "I must have a word with you!"

Gatilin was sitting alone. The river-closing was being postponed, Igarka was holding up the take-off of the visitor's flight, the weather here too could finally deteriorate from hour to hour, and he was sitting like a watchman, the irritation and anger with himself slowly accumulating inside him. Gatilin had always regarded Skvarsky with

indifference—Varya had recently said something about him, but he had already forgotten what... Oh, never mind! Yawning idly, Gatilin invited Skvarsky to sit down for a chat.

The latter seemed not to notice the invitation.

"Enough, it's time!" he blurted out. "You've got to act, Viktor Sergeyevich!"

Gatilin laughed. He was unexpectedly tickled by this outburst from Skvarsky, who was usually calm and full of sugary politeness towards him.

"I'm saying you must think aloud!" he repeated. "Aren't you going to ask me what about, Yuri Borisovich? Does that mean you're capable of anything?"

"I am, I am," Skvarsky fluttered his puffy hand in front of him like a fan. "Especially now that the Aniva's started rising."

"Don't talk rubbish!" Gatilin turned purple, but did not raise his voice. "The First of April, old friend, is long past. And in general..."

"Send for Basov before it's too late! I'll swear she rigged all this... We've got to take the readings. Basov himself will come—then that's all, you'll give in ... is that it? It's a disaster! We'll all be in trouble. Only I don't know who'll be the first..."

Skvarsky was in a state; it was not this, however, but a kind of extreme tension in his voice that alerted Gatilin. He frowned, frankly understanding nothing of this outburst, but a kind of inner mechanism had already begun working in him, switching itself on at the moment of danger, and, with an effort, reluctantly, Gatilin sat nearer the intercom switch-board. He should ask the Met Service if something had gone wrong there, but he kept himself in hand and asked Skvarsky:

"Where did this information come from?"

"Just look at the Aniva—it's raging already!" blurted out Skvarsky almost with exultation, then cut himself short. Gatilin's heavy stare rested on

him and, as it were, nailed him down several paces away from the table. Skvarsky's face sagged, and with the dying fall more appropriate to a disaster suddenly hitting the project, he said: "Some old man turned up, an aborigine—Vantulyaku, apparently... Anyway, you can see that the water's rising... Have it your own way, Viktor Sergeyevich, but I think Basov got the wind up! He realised the operation was off... After all, you yourself were telling him..."

Gatilin abruptly cut him short:

"I'm not interested in what you think! I need facts, facts!" He raised his voice and, fingering the switch on the panel, forgot that Skvarsky was there. "Elena Ilyinichna! Gatilin here... What's the position with the Aniva? Level? Flow-rate?" he asked imperatively.

"Flow-rate ... seven hundred and ninety," replied Elena coolly. "The level of the Aniva is rising."

"D'you realise what are you saying?"

"Yes," she replied. "Since seven in the morning..."

"What d'you mean since seven?" shouted Gatilin.

"The flow-rate was five hundred and fifty, as Basov forecast. At eight-twenty it fluctuated. At nine o'clock it rose to five hundred and seventy..."

"One moment!" Gatilin shook his head hard. "I can't understand all this! At nine you reported that a fall had been observed! Where does the seven hundred and ninety come from now?"

"It's now eight hundred!.."

Elena's voice was normal, was perhaps trembling very slightly, and she was talking rationally; but then how could this have happened?

"That flow-rate," she commented, as if smiling, "suits you more, as I remember, does it not, Viktor Sergeyevich?"

Gatilin flew off the handle.

"Have you lost your wits?" he barked.

"Yes, just fancy!.."

"Come to headquarters at once! With the observations log. I'm sending a car..." He heard Elena drop the receiver on to its cradle.

"What did I tell you!" stuttered Skvarsky beside him. "That's what I told you, Viktor Sergeyevich... And you didn't want to know..."

Gatilin sank into the chair. His fingers were still trembling on the trigger-like tumbler-switch on the panel! "Oh, hell!" he was thinking, appalled, not listening to Skvarsky. "This is an absolute disaster!.." But be that as it may, he had already finished the conversation with Basov's wife, had ordered her to report to headquarters and had done it in a new capacity for himself. Only one click, just as at the time of the reindeer hunt, but he had missed then, but not this time. Was the fate of the operation settled already? And not by his will... Three hundred cubic metres rate of flow above the norm... To close now would be like sticking your head in a noose... And Basov? Alimushkin? He thought he could hear their voices...

"Record it in the log, write down the facts," prompted Skvarsky hurriedly.

Gatilin stared dully at his hands, amazed that they were so disobedient to him.

"I can do it," said Skvarsky, realising what was wrong. Standing up—there was nowhere to sit—and to the sound of hurrying footsteps on the steps of the van, he wrote:

"11.55. According to Basova's report:

Flow-rate—800 cubic metres per second.

Level—actively rising since 8.20.

Received by V. S. Gatilin."

"Now we have it in writing..." said Yuri Borisovich with a flattering smile.

Gatilin looked at it and scribbled his signature.

Basov came into the van with Alimushkin and the rest. From the faces of Skvarsky and Gatilin, Alimushkin could see that Sokolyonok had told the truth... Basov snatched up the log with the ink not yet dry on it and read it. He sat down with his head in his hands. Unbelievable, impossible!..

"Have you called Elena?" he asked Gatilin in a broken, hoarse voice.

"Yes, here she is, in the car..." Gatilin looked glumly out of the window to avoid meeting Basov's eyes. The car he had sent for Elena braked and skidded to a stop near the carriage porch.

Heavily made-up, in a carelessly buttoned coat so that her white scarf was dangling down over her chest, Elena came into headquarters, her heels tapping loudly and defiantly. Her face was frozen, evidently against her will, with the tension at the sight of which all desire to talk to people fades. She did not say hello to anyone. Ignoring everybody, she went to the table and, opening her log at the required page, put it down in the middle. Silently, without looking at her, everybody who felt superfluous went out of the headquarters, leaving Gatilin, Basov, Alimushkin and Dasha. Gatilin glanced sideways at Dasha too, but remembered in time that she was Malyshev's daughter... "It's even better that way," he reasoned. "Let the old man find out all about it at first hand, from his daughter..." However, it was already impossible to keep quiet, and Gatilin, moving up Elena's log but not seeing anything in it, asked dully:

"Do you confirm your latest report?"

Elena hesitated a moment, then answered clearly:

"The flow-rate of the Aniva has exceeded eighty cubic metres..." She sighed. "That's the truth..."

"At what time did the level correspond to the one estimated? Was there such a moment? Or

wasn't there? And how do you explain all this?.."

"What difference does it make!.. Was... Wasn't... We're not children." She shrugged her shoulders. "You won't turn high water back again..."

"Control yourself, Elena Ilyinichna!" exploded Gatilin. "I don't think you are unaware of your responsibility... And you will have to answer for it, there's no avoiding that fact."

She was not flustered by this last remark. Nodding as if in agreement with Gatilin, Elena smiled at him understandingly and even compassionately, then said, licking her dry lips:

"Stop it, Viktor Sergeyevich..."

She was not asking, she was condescendingly permitting him to stop the useless conversation. "What is it all for?" she seemed to be saying. She knew everything!

Gatilin had expected anything from Elena, even hysteria, but not disagreement with him or objections, he raised his shaggy eyebrows and looked bewilderedly to his right at Alimushkin, and Basov, who was sitting opposite him at the table. Basov was silent. He did not raise his eyes from the table-top and a forgotten cigarette was smouldering in his fingers. From Elena's defiant attitude, he had grasped that there was no sense in trying to sort things out with her. She had overlooked the rise of the waters. On purpose. In this case, he was himself to blame. And it should be as clear to Gatilin, as to himself, and to Elena. It must have been clear to her for some time...

"Incidentally, were you the only one carrying out observations there?.. Why don't you say something?" Gatilin nervously flicked over several pages of the log, peering at the surnames. "Was Gordeyeva on duty today?"

"It's not her fault..." explained Elena laxly and somehow condescendingly. "I let her off to see the river-closing operation. The girl had to dress

up for the gala day..."

Alimushkin went up to Gatilin and looked over his shoulder at Elena's notes and entries.

"Have you made false entries with fictitious data here?!" he asked.

Elena's chin moved very slightly, which could have meant affirmation or denial...

"They seem fictitious to me," decided Alimushkin, and he looked at Gatilin. "We must know for certain..."

"You understand," objected Elena, "it's impossible to recheck..."

"Probably not," agreed Alimushkin. "But still, if it's an oversight or a chance error..."

"If it suits you to think that..."

Stopping opposite Elena and talking to her, Alimushkin fought down his mounting annoyance. He tried to speak evenly, calmly, although he felt that everything in him was wound up so tight that he himself could not understand how it was possible to be indifferent in such a situation, even if only outwardly. However, it looked as though Elena's nerves were stretched to the breaking-point. If she was now concerned not to betray agitation, then it was most likely that she was saying what she thought... This stiffness of hers and inner inflexibility would soon pass. As a rule, impulsive people do not long hold out against strong pressure—hysteria sets in. Clasping his hands behind his back and quickly, but without straining his voice, Alimushkin asked her:

"Tell me, Elena, did you decide on this all of a sudden, unexpectedly for yourself, or..."

"I've dreamed of it all my life!" she interrupted with a smile. "I've now convinced myself that I'm capable..."

Alimushkin, of course, also noted the irony in her words and the haste with which she had interrupted his question, but he seemed not to notice her outburst and his voice became even

more gentle:

"What precisely were the reasons?"

"My reasons won't make it any easier for you! And I'm not going to give them..." Elena flushed, thrust her hands into the pockets of her coat and pulled it more tightly round her, as if suddenly feeling the cold.

What could she say to them, indeed?.. How she had quarrelled, made peace with and parted from Basov all these years? Or how she rode that morning with Borodulin and nearly fell into the river?.. And then she had heard Basov's voice, amplified by the loudspeaker: "Anya, come back, it's all my fault!" They were of no interest. They weren't even reasons, they were all consequences... The cause was, maybe, that Basov, whatever he may have done, was always right!.. And the closing operation was the peak of his creative achievement! Now it had been disrupted, and Basov, no worse than she, understood that the former no longer had any meaning and this "episode" (she suddenly remembered Borodulin's word) would stick in Basov's mind for a long time to come. What else was there to talk about? Was she to blame for letting the girl have the day off? Of course! And she, the little fool, had been delighted...

Basov slowly got up from behind the table.

"That's enough, Pyotr Evseyevich," he said. "I shall answer for everything."

Alimushkin stopped Basov with an abrupt gesture and said to Elena:

"Have you read today's paper?"

"Paper?" she seemed taken aback by the suddenness of the question. In the morning, on arriving at work, she had seen it on her desk... One article was marked in red. She already knew that Nikita had been there. Which meant that he had underlined something useful to her. Elena had crumpled it up and thrown it into the wastepaper

basket. "Why," she asked Alimushkin. "Were there instructions about this business in it?"

"What are you bragging about, Elena?" Dasha could not restrain herself. "After all, after a thing like that, you ought to be ashamed..."

Elena did not bat an eyelid in her direction, but she let something slip in spite of herself.

"They'll survive it somehow..." The painted lips writhed in a smile.

"Lena, Lena..." Dasha turned away.

His jowels working, Gatilin looked expectantly at Basov. The latter met his glance, but there was nothing to be told from the expression on his face. A kind of deafness, an aloofness from everything glimmered in his eyes, and Gatilin took a particular dislike to this, but he did not ask Basov anything when the latter, looking down at his boots, left the van. On the porch, Basov stopped, turned his face to the wind and, putting his fingers to his bony, sharp chin, stood for a long time like that and, his elbows wide apart, stared at the Aniva.

The greenish-hued torrent was foaming noisily, and the wind was piling up wave on resilient wave in the closure channel. Foaming crests, torn off by the wind, were being swept into the whirlpool by the current, and Nikita could see the Aniva rising, swelling and playing in excess. If only they had started at nine! The pressure had been less then... But the flow-rate was eight hundred now... What could they use to hold back the extra three hundred cubic metres? No, there was nothing. Without looking at the bridge and the dumping platform where there were crowds of people, Basov turned to look at the upper rapids, where the black dots of the boulders should be visible; but either the waters were washing over them up there, or scraps of low cloud were reflected on the surface...

In the van as if finally convinced that Elena was

not going to say any more to them, Gatilin nodded to her.

"You may go..."

Elena went out.

Watching until she had closed the door behind her, Gatilin involuntarily stifled a sigh. "What was going to happen to Basov now?" he thought regretfully. Himself, he considered that fate was cruel only to the weak. And this was fair, because the strong are hardened, toughened people who do not make the mistakes which have to be paid for so cruelly. He was personally glad to do anything not to cause Basov fresh pain, but he could not sit and do nothing about it. He could not be silent and think about other matters, when it was all so obvious...

Dasha rose to her feet and went out in silence.

"It seems to me," said Gatilin finally, "that she is suffering from severe depression..."

"She" was Elena. Alimushkin took it to mean that. He was not even surprised at the coincidence between his thoughts and Gatilin's. He simply remembered that last winter Elena had been listless and withdrawn. Irritability could be explained partly by character, partly by her concern at Basov's being eternally busy. But if it really was truly depression, and it looked like it, then today's attack was the relapse of an old illness... There was truth in the saying that the North could play hell with weak nerves.

Basov returned. He sat in his former place, but something had already changed in the van, as if his silent appearance had drawn a kind of line in the relations of those who were sitting there and who, in their own way, respected one another.

Men...

They were left alone and were talking now each with himself, and each knew what the other might say. Something irrevocable had happened. But if two of them were silent, it meant that it was hard

for them to pronounce sentence on the third, or it meant that they wanted him to stand up and tell them about it himself.

The hands of the clock were pointing to twelve ten, and it seemed as if an eternity had passed.

The door opened wide and, chest forward, with incomprehensible solemnity and importance in her gait and voice, into the van sailed Gatilin's wife, Varya.

"May I?" she drawled, not expecting an answer.

"No!" said Gatilin curtly.

"How so?" she thought. Male society is as considerate as it is hospitable... Except that when you go in, they won't throw you out—the effect of presence!.. And Varvara Timofeyevna took another step.

"Get out!" barked Gatilin, and Varya jumped back as if stung. She flushed, ashamed, as if someone else might have heard that shout—now there's going to be a scene—and thought feverishly: "Oh, my goodness!.. He's on his high horse again!"

With the important gait of a goose as it walks along, shaking its tail, Varvara descended the steps, holding up the skirts of her fur coat, and searched the crowd with her eyes. Where was Skvarsky? It was time for her to clarify with him what had been achieved...

"Well?" Gatilin transferred his heavy gaze from Basov to Alimushkin.

Alimushkin was screwing up his eyes because of the tobacco smoke. He had already run over the options and what Gatilin was intending to announce now was the only one left to them... Basov either did not hear the question or didn't want to. Nikita's face was earthy grey, but he was thinking about something that concerned him, he was thinking—Gatilin could have sworn this and it seemed incredible, when a man had been crushed, destroyed with no allowances for talent, youth,

experience, inexperience... What else was there to think about?

"I am forced to dismiss Basov..." said Gatilin quietly and with a note of interrogation. He did not expect any objections; it was rather a categorical statement in polite form.

"There's probably no alternative," responded Alimushkin dully, and he thought that Basov should not condemn him. Basov, in fact, turned his head, looked at his friend, and said nothing.

Gatilin shoved a cigarette into his mouth from a packet left by someone, or perhaps his own, and without his usual briskness lit up, drew on it and promptly spat it out—he was in no mood for smoking, he must finish the matter in hand as quickly as possible... Wiping his lips and about to switch on the external loudspeakers, he stood up out of the habit of addressing the public on his feet. But he felt the words, before he spoke, already sticking in his throat.

Basov, who had only just guessed Gatilin's intentions, rose abruptly and before Gatilin could switch on the speakers, gripped his arm.

"What are you intending to do?" he asked.

Scowling, Gatilin tried to unlock his fingers, but this demanded more effort than he had expected. Gatilin lowered his arm and although Basov,, as such, no longer existed for him, he replied:

"I'm cancelling the operation."

"What d'you mean?" snapped Basov, and the "you" was meant for Gatilin and Alimushkin.

"Viktor Sergeyevich, Pyotr!" continued Basov, raising his voice. "I insist on going through with the operation! I agree, the moment's been missed, our chances are thin, they hardly exist, but it's important for us to get a hold!.. Where one stone settles, another will, I'm convinced! And anyway—I just don't understand how you can refuse without even having tried..."

"We've had enough ventures for one day!"

With no intention of backing down, Gatilin chopped the air with his hand.

"Enough! We've had our little game!.. You can quarrel with me, but not with the Aniva..." He swore. You could hit that Basov on the head with a club, but he was hell-bent on his own ruin. "I won't allow it!.. And by the way, Nikita Leontievich, I'm proceeding from your estimates, don't forget that... Don't lose your head, I'm telling you! You might still find it handy..."

"Calm yourself, Nikita, calm yourself..." Alimushkin laid a hand on his shoulder. "Think it over soberly. Gatilin's right..."

But Basov, somehow subdued and externally calm, only with a bitter smile, with almost a grimace of suffering on his face, said:

"So that's how it is, is it? You're washing your hands of it too early!.. Very well." He brushed off Alimushkin's hand. "In that case, I'm still chief of headquarters! With all the consequences..."

Lightly pushing Gatilin away from the switchboard, Basov pulled the microphone out of its socket and, unwinding a length of the lead so as to allow himself freedom of movement, he said, half turning to Alimushkin:

"You may call the Party Committee, the Administration, pass a resolution, discharge, rescind ... and ... is there anything else you care to think of?.. But while there's even half a chance for the operation, I won't stand down..."

He had no time to watch the impression he had made on them. He went out on to the porch, raised the microphone to his lips and said loudly:

"Attention! First column to the right platform, second to the left!"

He sighed and listened as an uneven, many-voiced sound rolled over the bank. At that moment, at Silin's depot, the lorries roared into life and moved off in a column for the river site. He knew this, he knew that the operation had

already started and, as if in confirmation, the silence over the Aniva was shattered by the popping of exhaust gases as the bulldozers started up.

"Unauthorised personnel to leave the platforms! Left platform... Attention, Gittaulin! In memory of Viktor Snegirev"—and Basov's voice tightened—"dump the first rock!"

"It's started!" the crowd roared at once, and their shouts drowned the grating of iron.

Basov saw the body of Gittaulin's dump-truck rise. Now it was as high as it would go and the top was motionless. On the blotchy face of the granite fragment, still miraculously there in the back of the lorry, could clearly be seen the inscription: "Submit, Aniva!" But the driver was already smoothly rocking the lorry on its brakes like a cradle, and the mass of stone twenty-five tons in weight, slithered down the iron floor and, with a screech and a shower of sparks, hurtled downwards. It caught the cliff, scattering stone from the cliff-side as it did so, turned over in mid-air and crashed into the water. A high grey swell washed up over it and the broken wave lapped at the wheels of the lorry. The rock was doubtless still falling and had not yet reached the bottom, but Gittaulin was already driving up through a narrow passage cut in the rocks to the platform. Signalling to him, the other lorries were coming to meet him in the opposite direction, in line astern. On the right platform too, three dump-trucks were turning round in an orderly manner. Together, wheel to wheel, they went up to the edge of the platform, rocking the humped backs of the rocks so as to throw them simultaneously into the Aniva. When they splashed into the water, and the drivers, obeying the commands of the flagmen, throttled down, all who were on the bridge, or had climbed on to the crags, or were standing near the headquarters—all heard them being dragged by

the current along the river-bed. As if in derision of human daring, the Aniva was rolling the lumps of rock over the bottom with ease, and the rumble, rising up from the depths, was like hollow thunder coming from far way. An alarmed murmur ran through the crowd; there was doubt on their faces. "They won't hold..." said someone beside Basov, but he did not even look round. He was watching as first one, then another, then the third rock, tossing their gigantic combs, reared up over the Rapids, their sides glistening as they turned over and went down with the foam. Below, they were spun round again until they settled somewhere in the depths of the stream with the whirlpools boiling over them.

Strange, but Basov was not discouraged by this logical and discouraging beginning. He could see dismay on the faces of his comrades, and, perhaps, condemnation too; he could see them avoiding his eye, and on the fringe of his mind he seemed to admit that they were right, but at the same time he was living by a different sensation—it was, perhaps, the still timid awareness of a missed chance, the one he had nevertheless not taken the night before. Yes, he had calculated how the force of gravity and the force of the Aniva's current should meet head on, but the formulae, however much he manipulated them, did not diminish the Aniva's superiority at the critical moment. Gatilin had understood this perfectly. And, as he looked for him among those round him, Basov thought, not without irony about himself, that with his calculations he had paved the way to retreat. But, in all seriousness, could he, who with every cell of his body knew and felt where each rock of the future dam would settle—could he really admit defeat, especially now, when willy-nilly he had accepted the challenge, or had himself thrown down the gauntlet? There was an answer, it had come to the rumble of rocks being

swept away by the current, and only now did it seem incomprehensible why he had not thought of it earlier, "in the peace of the study", as Malyshev might have said... That was just it—not everything occurs to us in the peace of the study...

Gatilin, whose nerves could not stand this pointless hullabaloo perpetrated by Basov, reproachfully and demandingly asked Alimushkin:

"How long, for goodness' sake?"

"Let's wait... They've got to lock on somewhere..."

Gritting his teeth so that his chin went white with tension, Gatilin went over to Basov.

"Come out of it!" he said, not concealing his exasperation. "Everythings's going down the drain!"

"Yes, yes, yes," replied Basov, already forgetting that a minute back he had been angry with Gatilin, and he laughed. "This is the closing operation!"

He gave the signal and, in response, the loaded dump-trucks seemed to stumble at the river bank. They also pulled up on the left one. The drivers climbed out of their cabs in bewilderment and shouted questions to one another, but without getting down off the steps. Drowning the chugging of engines, the powerful loudspeakers relayed Basov's latest order:

"Attention! Silin and Korostylev... Bulldozers proceed to platforms. Tie the rocks together. In pairs, to make a string! Flagmen, go to the bulldozers."

Now it made sense. The dump-trucks backed off several metres from the edge of the platform and unloaded the rocks there. The howser-men passed cables round them. When the knots had been tightened, the flagman—in this case, Korostylev himself standing at the edge of the platform—gave the signal. The bulldozers, their tracks skidding, ground down the surface under-

neath them but nevertheless pushed the bound rocks to the edge, under which the black river fumed and seethed. Korostylev was managing it so that the rocks fell together. One more wave of the flag, and a hundred-ton garland crashed in the abyss; the heavy, thunderous roar re-echoed back from the cliffs on the bank, the window-panes in headquarters rattled at the shock. They were rolling... They were rolling along under the water like peas... "A fiasco? Finis? Madness!.." thought Gatilin. And he felt as if stone sighs were tearing his soul up from the bottom of the river-bed. He was not looking either at Basov or at the Aniva. He was afraid that his heart would stop. There was a booming in his ears—machines, people, the Aniva... Varya kept trying to catch his eye... "What for?" he wondered, and could not see, could not hear that the garland, after a rumble, had lodged somewhere in the depths before reaching the bared fangs of the Rapids...

Basov gripped somebody wildly by the elbow, embraced him, danced, shouted at the top of his voice, forgetting about the microphone. Someone took it up beside him, and the shout travelled as on a chain to the platform with extras:

"Come on, lads!.. Come on, harder, she's giving in, the bitch!"

Silin and Korostylev—no flies on them!—were already preparing another garland, and it crashed down like the first; then a fifth, and so on to the tenth; but the noise of rolling rocks was already more subdued and less prolonged until finally, with the twelth garland, it died down completely, and nothing could be heard any more but the heavy splashing of the river, like a feverish sighing.

The rocks had settled!

Yes, they had settled! It was the beginning...

Everybody understood this—Alimushkin, Dasha, Korostylev... Lyuba rushed up to him and

kissed him unashamedly, and Vasya, wiping his face with the signal flag, threatened her furiously. Odarchenko hid from Basov behind someone's back so that he wouldn't see her tear-reddened eyes. No one, herself included, understood how she, while on duty, had found time to keep observations and notes amid all uproar... On the bridge, hats were flying up into the air and down into the Aniva; there was the glitter of small change being emptied out of pockets; the band, which had been got together from goodness knows where, was hoarsely playing a fanfare. Old Kasendu Vantulyaku was perhaps the only sad one just now; he was sighing briefly and mournfully because the *lyosa* Soviets had outwitted the Aniva. She would not overpower or roll away the new rocks that man was thrusting into her, like a fist between the jaws of a maddened beast—an old she-wolf stretches out her paws and begs for mercy, and so, in deep sorrow, the Aniva would enter the trap prepared for her, to pull, to work in electric harness, if the *lyosa* Alimka was to be believed... Where were the omnipotent *koika* looking, how could they have allowed this? Beside the old man, his grandson Vova Tokko, his big, toothy mouth split wide open from ear to ear, was whispering delightedly in Russian:

"Great! That's the stuff!"

Wisdom teaches that water is stronger than fire and iron, but Vantulyaku had truly lost faith in everything that he had believed and that his forebears had believed over the ages. He wanted the river to spit the rocks out again, but did not know how to achieve this.

Outshouting the noise of the bulldozers, Alimushkin called to Gatilin:

"See that?.. No, tell me, have you seen it?"

Gatilin nodded his head in agreement, but his lips, bitten, twisted like shavings, were involuntarily parting, and the heavy head was titled to one

side. Wiping his face with his handkerchief, he sidled up to Basov. He said nothing. He might have been thinking that he was ashamed of his recent vanity and weak-mindedness, and he was sure he was glad for Basov, but to himself he was thinking: "Except that I'm right too."

Seeing him there at his side, Basov demurred for a moment, then pushed the microphone into his hand, saying in a tired voice that was nevertheless still strong with excitement:

"Here, take over!.. Give me a chance for a smoke!"

He sat down there, on the porch, nodding and smiling at the drivers, and Kolya Sokolyonok, who was running past, shouted to Basov:

"I told you, we'd close her. What could she do about it?"

...On the day of the autumn equinox, people in Barakhsan were living, working, rejoicing and suffering—ordinarily, as everywhere else on earth. Few noticed how the beard of the Aniva's waterfall had become thinner, as if the most powerful streams had been plucked out. People were making a bit of a noise out of happiness; nearby, not so merrily, the Aniva was also making a quiet noise.